

TO GAIN A DREAM by **WILLIAM ROTSLER**

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO SARAH ANNE LAWRENCE? by **TED WHITE**

DELIVERYMAN by **RICHARD E. PECK**

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Sept 1975

AMAZING science fiction

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MARUNE: ALASTOR 933 by **JACK VANCE**



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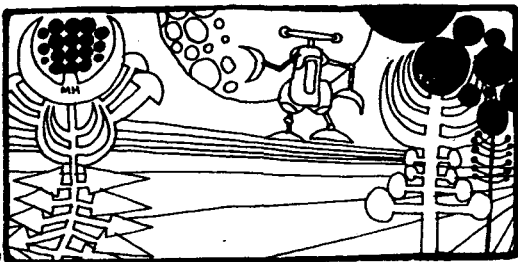
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**TED
WHITE**

EDITORIAL



COUNTDOWN TO DOOMSDAY: I'd like to quote a scenario you've all encountered a dozen times at least in your stf reading:

"An obscure scientist doing routine research work discovers that a common household product, long thought harmless, has a disastrous delayed effect capable of destroying all life on this planet by the year 2000. The huge amount of product x already manufactured will eventually claim thousands of lives. But an immediate ban will save thousands more—and doomsday can be averted.

"The scientist warns the world. A few newspapers pick up the story, but most ignore it. The government takes no action, and industry increases its output of the popular product x. The warning has been all but forgotten when, months later, three major scientific studies all confirm the ominous threat. Television networks broadcast the dire news, newspapers headline it.

"We've all seen the movie, and we know what happens next. The entire world swings into action. Cut to Washington, Moscow, Paris, London, Tokyo, the United Nations. Product x factories everywhere are shut down. The scientist is hailed as a hero. Mankind is saved.

"Wrong. The world does not swing into action. The factories are not shut down. And one other thing—it's not a

movie."

THUS OPENS one of the most frightening articles I've ever read—in the March 7, 1975, issue of *New Times*. It's not stf at all: it's an article called "Not with a bang, but with a psssst!" And it concerns itself with a genuine menace to our planetary survival, one about which responsible authorities appear to be doing nothing.

The menace is Freon—a DuPont brandname for the fluorocarbon used as a propellant in aerosol sprays. Fluorocarbons are man-made and never before existed in nature. Nearly all the fluorocarbons ever produced (they're a twentieth-century phenomenon) are still in our atmosphere. A man named Sherry Rowland set out to find out what happens to fluorocarbons in our atmosphere. Since nothing on earth or in our lower atmosphere destroys fluorocarbons—they do not naturally break down in an earthly environment—they inevitably rise into the stratosphere. In those upper reaches they are acted upon by ultraviolet radiation, breaking down and releasing chlorine in the process.

Independently of Rowland, three separate atmospheric research groups had already concluded that chlorine injected into the stratosphere would set off a catalytic chain reaction: one chlorine atom could destroy 10,000

(cont. on page 126)

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Cities have a way of dehumanizing their inhabitants. So also do government bureaucracies. Put the two together, and ask yourself—

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO SARAH ANNE LAWRENCE?

TED WHITE

I REALLY DON'T know what's going on. They told me I wouldn't have any memories—and I don't. But my dreams—!

I just woke up and I'm still shaking. I've got a cold sweat and something heavy and dark is still lurking in the back of my head. I used the spare injectab right away, like Dr. Rollins told me, but I don't feel any different. My heart's still racing like I just ran up all thirty two flights and I guess you can tell from the tape that my voice is shaky.

Okay; I'm sorry. The first thing they told me at the Center was to be sure to identify myself at the beginning of each tape. Sarah Anne Lawrence, age 22, unattached status, Public Assistance file 32-O-78, case 7339-B. And I live at Greenwich Square, Building M, apartment 32-71.

Maybe that helped. I don't feel so bad now. I was going to describe my dream, that's what the tape was for, but now I can't remember it any more. Just the very end—waking up feeling like

I did one time in grade school when a boy punched me in my belly and I couldn't catch my breath. I had this feeling, see, that if I didn't wake up *right away*, my heart was going to stop. Or maybe it did stop and I knew it wouldn't start again . . . it's getting kind of fuzzy . . . I can't keep it straight any more. Just trying to talk about it is driving the whole thing right out of my mind. So, forget it. This isn't going to be any help.

. . . I just turned the tape off, but you know something funny? As soon as I turned it off this real lonely feeling hit me, like suddenly I was all alone. So I turned it back on again and it was like sun coming out from behind a cloud. That probably seems dumber to me than it does to you—whoever you are—because, see, this apartment is just one room on the inside. No windows. I got no idea whether it's sunny outside or not. I mean, who can tell?

I guess that's why I felt so

Illustrated by Richard Olsen

lonely when I shut the tape off. It's kind of empty in here. I was just looking around, trying to figure it out. The place is a mess. I don't guess I've bothered to do any cleaning up in . . . oh, at least a month. Not since I went down to the Center, anyway.

You know, this is the first time I've ever talked to a tape like this. It's really kinda neat. They told me, "The next time you have one of those dreams, as soon as you wake up you dictate it to the tape." But then they want all that stuff about who I am and everything and I never *could* hold onto one of these dreams. That's why I couldn't tell Dr. Rollins about them. I guess a tape isn't much better, either.

I wish I knew who you are. I mean, you're *somebody*, listening to this tape, right? It's like I'm sitting here talking to you only I can't see you; because you're in another room or something. I thought Dr. Rollins would be the one, but the man who routes his traffic told me he wouldn't have time and "an assistant" would listen to my tape. Well, "Hi there!" to you, Assistant.

I guess I'm feeling better already. I just looked at the clock over the door and I see that I'll have to go down to the Center in about half an hour anyway, so I guess I'll just sit here and babble until I fill the tape up. That'll give you something to listen to, right?

So what can I talk about?

I wish I could talk about what I



do at the Center, but I can't. I don't mean I wouldn't like to or anything—I just can't. I guess you know about that already; you've probably punched in for my file already, so you know more about it than I do.

I can tell you about how I happened to get the job, though. Shall I do that?

That's one thing about this "conversation"—you don't say much.

Well, anyway. My job. By Sarah Anne Lawrence, Age 22. I think I'm getting silly. I guess it's the stuff in the injectab. Some sort of pep-up drug; Dr. Rollins called it a "mood-improver". Is my mood improved? I guess so.

I've been on Public Assistance since High School, of course.

I remember when I graduated at sixteen and my mother signed all the papers and said to me, "Well, Sarah, you're all grown up, now. You're officially a ward of the state, and you'll get an apartment all your own." I remember how good I felt about that, just about getting a room of my own and not having to go out and hang around the halls every night she had a boyfriend up to see her.

I really didn't think things were all that bad here, either, until they passed that new law last year and about a month and a half ago they told me I had to take a position at the Center. Yeah, "Take a position" was what they called it. I knew that some people could still get jobs, but I sure didn't

think I'd get one. But they've got this law about people on Public Assistance now and what burns me is, I don't get any money or anything—it just goes to Public Assistance. So I don't think of it as a real job or anything.

So I had to go down to the Center and get interviewed and take a lot of tests and everything. And I mean *everything*. They tested my blood and they poked into every hole in my body, and then after that they sent me up to see Dr. Rollins for my interview.

I guess I don't have to describe Dr. Rollins to you. He reminds me of the Passive-Aggression teacher I had in fifth grade: So cool, so completely in control of the situation that I just feel like a fool whenever I try to talk to him. He described my job to me:

"You'll report to the center every day at 4:45 pm, Sarah," he said, and right off I felt pinned down because he didn't call me "Ms. Lawrence," or even just "Lawrence," the way some of my teachers did. He just started right out calling me "Sarah."

"You'll report to Pleasure Control on the ground floor," he said. Then he stopped.

"Uhh, what is it I'm supposed to do?" I asked.

"That will be entirely taken care of," he told me. "It won't be of any concern to you."

"What do you mean," I asked him, "it won't be of any concern to me? How will I know what to do?"

"Sarah," he said, "I'm a busy man, so I'll just say this once. I have forty-two more girls to process after you and my time is valuable." I thought to myself that if his time was so valuable he didn't have to waste so much time just *telling* me how valuable it was, but I didn't say anything. "When you report to the Center you will be given an injection—one of these—" and he held up an injectab, but they never have any labels that make sense to me, so how could I tell what was in it?—" and you'll completely blank out. When you recover your memory you will go home. That's all there is to it. Your job will be totally painless." And he showed me his teeth. I think it was supposed to be a smile.

So I reported to Pleasure Control the next day and they did just what he said and I woke up at the end of the day and went home, and that was that. I mean, no memories, nothing. So I really *can't* tell you what it is I do, because I don't know myself.

I really didn't much like the idea at first. I mean, it's like renting your body out or something—who knows what they're doing with it while you're out cold? But it's the government, after all, isn't it?

I actually tried to quit it, once.

I think it was after my third day. I woke up feeling really bad. I don't know why, but I really felt rotten, really depressed. I took a couple of Sunshines, but they

didn't do a thing for me—I think I was burned—and I just decided I wouldn't go back there. It was bothering me, these slices of time they were taking out of my life.

You'll laugh—or will you? What makes you laugh, anyway? Can I tell you funny jokes? Where was I, anyway? Oh yeah—you'll laugh when I tell you what I did.

I took a subway down to Battery Park.

I don't know why—I guess because I'd never been there and the name appealed to me—the "Park" part. A man told me there used to be a real park there, with real grass and trees and everything. There's this little metal plaque on the side of a building, and that's it. I felt really stupid, just standing there on the sidewalk. It didn't really look any different than it does around here, or maybe at the Center: lots of tall buildings and swarms of people. I don't like to go out much, on account of the people.

I was standing there, wondering what to do next, and this man who is maybe a few years older than me gives me this funny look as he goes past, and then he turns around, smiles a big smile, and jumps off the walk. The next thing I know he's coming right up to me and saying, "Hi there, remember me?"

I never saw him before in my life, but he keeps right on with this stuff. "I really missed you today," he says.

"What are you talking about?" I

ask him. "I never saw you before in my life."

"The hell you haven't," he says. "I saw you yesterday right about this time."

"You couldn't—" I'm saying and
"—Up at the Center" he's saying and

"Sarah Anne Lawrence?" this voice says from somewhere right behind me.

His face—the guy I'd been talking with, I mean—it just froze up and he shut his mouth and I guess he just walked right away, because when I turned around to look for him a minute later he was gone.

The man who had come up behind me was a cop, of course. I'd forgotten about the I-disk I was wearing; of *course* they could find me. "You're late for work," the cop said. He was very impersonal about it, like another machine or something. And he took me back up to the Center and that was the last time I tried to skip going.

I wondered about the man who said he knew me, of course. It had something to do with when I was at the Center—something I did while I was there which of course I can't remember—but I forgot about him until last week.

Last week he showed up at my building looking for me. I don't know how he found me here—he said he'd heard the cop say my name, but out of a city of 20 million what good's a name for finding anybody? That's why we all have to wear I-disks—so the gov-

ernment can find us when they want to. But I never heard of anybody else getting to use them—not for finding someone, anyway.

I think he followed me home. He showed up about half an hour after I got back, anyway, and the security computer flashed his picture on the screen and asked me if I wanted to see him.

Well, of course I didn't, but then I saw his lips moving and the sound came on suddenly with him saying "—at least talk to her for a minute?"

Well, I'm a sucker for people anyway, so I said he could talk to me for a minute if he wanted, but that was all. I mean, the circuits would be monitored and *he* knew that too, so I didn't think he'd cause any trouble, especially not if they didn't let him in. So he told me that he wanted to see me and talk to me.

"Okay, you're seeing me," I said (I punched on the video for him) "and we're talking. What do you want?"

"They never let us talk at the Center," he said, and his face had this sorta sad, wistful expression on it. "I just want to talk a little, you know?"

"What about?" I asked.

"Oh . . . you know," he said. "You. And me."

"What about me?"

"Well, it's like here I see you everyday for half an hour in that little cubicle at the Center, but who can talk? They don't want us

to talk there—they tell me every time I ask, 'You can't talk. It's against the rules.' But you're a person too. I can tell that. When I ran into you on the street that time—you were like a different person entirely, but I knew who you were instantly! It's like I've seen two halves of you and I want to put them together, do you know what I mean?"

I shook my head. "No."

"What I'm trying to say is, until I saw you on the street that time, you were just one of the girls at the Center, you know? Just another cute chick—just an attractive body, and that's it. No personality, you know? At the Center it's just a job and I can tell you're all turned off inside when I look in your eyes. Then, on the street, there's something *there*. I've been back every day to see you at the Center, but it's not the same, it's just 'business as usual.' So I remembered your name and I thought maybe . . ."

"Maybe what?"

"Well, maybe I could come up. . . ?"

"Uh-uh." I shook my head at him. "No."

"Why not?"

"You've seen me and you've talked to me. That's enough," I said.

"Wait!" he said as I started to switch him off.

"What?" I said.

"Aren't you lonely? Don't you want to talk?"

I looked around my room. It

wasn't the neatest room in the world (nowhere nearly as neat as my mother's room used to be) but it was mine. Nobody had been in my apartment since I got it and that's the way I like it. Maybe there's millions of other people swarming all over the place outside my door, but inside it's just for me. I like it that way. Well, usually, anyway. When I haven't had those dreams. So I told him to go away and that ended it.

As a matter of fact, I think the really bad dreams started right after that. I don't know why except he must have upset me more than I thought. I mean, I really felt sorry for him, but that doesn't mean I want to *talk* to him and it certainly doesn't mean I want him in my room.

Well, I've had a bad dream every night since then. I sleep a lot these days—usually I just go to sleep after the eleven o'clock wrapup and sleep twelve or fourteen hours—but I keep waking up from these awful dreams that just wrench at me horribly. I told you about the one I had this time—not that I remember it much any more—and when I had three in a row I asked to talk to Dr. Rollins, mostly I guess because he *is* a doctor, and he gave me the spare injectab and the tape machine and told me to tell the tape about my dream.

I don't know what's really going on, but I'm sure it has something to do with my job. Are you sure that stuff really blocks all my

memories? And what is it I'm not supposed to remember, anyway?

Well, I see the tape is just about finished so I guess this is as good a place as any to st—

STATUS REPORT: PA File 32-0-78; 7339-B, Sarah Anne Lawrence.

Subject showing signs of emotional breakdown, due to subconscious "bleed-over" (see Thompkins & Brown, "Some Reported Cases of Memory Bleed in the use of Phenophiasaline;" Timkovsky, "Emotional Interrelations and Memory Blockage," both in active storage), triggered by reported incidents of contact with 'client'. Statistical likelihood of chance contact .000071% probability, but verified by Public Officer report A-69375076-0 (active storage) and security records of Greenwich Square readout.

SUGGESTED ACTION: Subject should be transferred to work and housing in another borough and all possibilities for continued contact with 'client' terminated. Subject should be re-evaluated for use of Phenophiasaline as memory block; consideration to be given to surgical alternatives. Subject still qualified for work in Pleasure Control (estimated duration: twelve years, three months).

MEMORANDUM: To Dr. B. Rolins. From Dr. S. DePasquale.

Listen, Bill, I don't think this new drug, Phenophiasaline, is all that hot. We've had four reported breakdowns thus far (and you'll recall this was predicted in the preliminary literature), mostly during sleep. It's the same old story—some memory always persists, even if it's accessible only in dreams. You'll also recall I was against the use of drugs from the start. Most of these hookers are vegetables to begin with; I think we'd be a lot better off with psycho-surgery, and so what if the initial expense is a lot greater? It's permanent, and there's no danger of unexpected side-effects. Of course, if you ask me, the whole idea of shielding their delicate sensibilities from the nature of their work is a lot of damn-fool nonsense. Take that 32-0-78 7339-B, for example: I've reviewed the tapes of her on-the-job performance and there's one healthy little pig, enjoying herself in full rut with every guy she takes on. Why shield her from the one enjoyable aspect of her life? Well, it's your headache, old buddy. Have fun with it.

—TED WHITE

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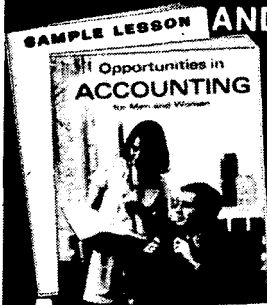
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TO GAIN A DREAM

WILLIAM ROTSLER

William Rotsler, whose last appearance here was "The Immortality of Lazarus" (December, 1973), returns after too long an absence with a vivid description of one man's search for a dream deferred . . .

IT WAS A DIFFERENT WORLD, worn and painted bright and worn again, far from the stérile white and shiny smooth black and crystalline clear of his world. The old man shrugged off a big-assed brunette who never stopped laughing, her red gape slack, her melons jiggling madly beneath the outdated butterfly sheath. She was not the one he sought.

Eyes slid off him, gauging him with practiced shrewdness, then the casual, friendly approach as another ripe-bodied dollie broke loose from a gathering of secret-sharers and seized his arm with rehearsed lust.

"Here, old sir, feel that'un! Ain't that a bristol buster, eh?" A bare breast, sleek and tawny and firm, brushed his arm. "Go on, Angel show the gentleman that bird you keep hidden in your dress. Ain't that a sweet one, sir? Hey, wait a minute, so you don't like the titty ones? What about Margot there? She's a Frenchie, she is, and you know how they are. Breed 'em for the hump, right? Bet your readout at month's end she'll wipe your control deck. Hey, mate, wait up!"

Grand Tower, East Entrance.

M.I.T.A. Chicago Arm.

Michigan Avenue. San Francisco Street. United Nations Plaza. The Terrance O'Brien Building. Denmark Hotel.

All the places, all the smiles and staring eyes, and all the empty eyes and clutching hands. A different world, co-existing with Babylon and Rome and Sodom, with war-torn cities and defeated capitols. A sweaty, fleshy, stained, desperate world.

And in it was Adrienne.

She was the one he had wanted all during the Changeover and right through the Bad Times. She was a young thing then, easily hurt by rejection, but selling tit and ass on the pedestrian levels around Grand Tower and IBM Square and as far south as the Mall.

Almost every day he had seen her, belted against the wind and standing where the snow wouldn't catch in her fancy hairdos, or nipples showing right through the summer sunskin fabrics. Two years, then nothing. A tall blonde stood in her place, then later a short redhead/blonde/brunette.

But the old man had not forgotten her. Adrienne Carter. Adri-

enne Armstrong. Adrienne Winsor. Adrienne Stanley.

And now he had the right inputs and his card shone brightly and the smilers and paddies and primpers were all nice and sleek and they arched their backs and lowered their heads and smiled slow, knowing smiles, making the invitations life-size blowups of themselves. But none were Adrienne.

Centralcompute. Uninews Building. Gypsy Theater was showing *Count Dracula Versus Queen Cleopatra* and beneath the marquee were a dozen girls in exaggerated clothing. One had her breasts tattooed with tiny blue flower wreaths. Three had their own individual versions of how Cleopatra dressed. One had a rubber snake, laughing as she poked it towards a transsexual Dracula.

The old man's eyes skipped over them as he trudged along. *Allowing for the years, allowing for memory slippage, allowing for changing styles . . .* The old man wondered if he'd know her if he saw her.

And suddenly there she was, coming towards him from the night, the city towers behind her like immense control panels, crystal matrixes from some futuristic diorama.

Adrienne.

Older, fleshier, harder . . . but Adrienne.

"Uh . . . Adrienne?"

The big eyes, reinforced with

makeup, swung towards him and briefly narrowed. "The name's Tory . . . but it used to be Adrienne . . . oh, sure, sure, I remember you, old sir." She pressed close and smiled, one hand under his arm, the other on his chest. "Yes, you were the nice gentleman that left such a generous tip and you so good it was me that should have tipped *you*!"

"No, you don't understand, I've never . . . never been with you . . ." She hugged his arm between her generous breasts and told him it didn't matter and he told her about hunting for her.

"You really looked all over like you said? Really? Ya kinda get to a girl with a touch like that, my studdo. You sure you ain't that fine rider that rode me so good that Easter? You sure do look like him, begging your pardon, old sir."

No, not me, the old man said.

I wanted to, but.

Now I can.

I'm rich. I finally did something and I've been indulging myself.

"Rich?" Laughter and the pressure of a great breast against the old man's arm. "Rich and ya cum down *here*? Say, I've had some zongo clients, mister, but no citizen like you, that's for zero reset. Just you let me see your cards, old sir, and you and the former Miss Adrienne Marsden will see about push-push, eh?"

Card. The gold card with the edging of tiny stars. The gaping red mouth. The quick shrewd

look up and down over the fabro suit, forever unwrinkable but forever rumpled.

"This one hot? You don't look like any gold star ta me, citizen." The look over the shoulder, ignoring the old man's assurances. The twitch, and the swift, oily appearance of the tanned young man with the plastic smile and the shiny suit with the tabs and buckles and improbable zippers.

"Hullo, Tor, what zips?"

"Gold card, Jonny, but, well, I dunno." The nervous eyes and the quick smile were flung at the old man.

"Mr. Nosseck? -Hi, I'm Jonny Leach. I'm a sort of friend of the girls along here, y'know? Business adviser, you might say. No, Tory, you can see this here is a real gent of the right sort. We oughta be proud to have a citizen like him coming round. Look, lamb, all ya gotta do is pop a quizzer into the TIS there and double-quiz the brain. The System will show you for a suspicious bit, I'm certain. Pop over there now and give Total Info a chance, huh? Ah, you know, Mr. uh Nosseck, these girls . . . ahh . . . you'd think with the brave boys flying around out there in the old night and the fine lads up to the red planet itself, and with the fusion torches cleaning up the old globe and all the fine new suburbs they're planting everyday, well, you'd think these dollies would find something to do with the space program or one of the planetary services, wouldn't

you? Clackering the old computers, huh? Or jakering the jockeys, or something with a future. Ah, me, no. They're right here like they was ten thousand years ago, I'll bet, hustling, peddling their bottoms, jakering strangers. Just like we weren't conquering the universe. Ah, here she comes. Look at that walk, Mister N, look at that. Prime, still prime. Look at those bonny bristols, huh? Prime stuff there, and I can tell by her smile you'll have a good jaker. She don't take to just every hard rocket that comes along, you know, nossir. Well, let's see now, Tory sweets . . . ah, just as I said, just as I said, a prime, prime client for the old sidewalk services. Could tell that the first time I saw him. Now you take him along to your box and see you don't try to argue him up. Just give him a jolly dolly jiggle, eh?"

When it was over, so was the old man's dream.

Her flesh, his flesh, anybody's flesh. The well-rehearsed intimacies, the hot words, the almost-satiny flesh had sluiced away all his remaining shards of dream.

The old man went back out into the street, his unwrinkled suit rumpled and smelling of Martian Nights and sweat and disused karma.

And yet he still had not broached the flesh of that bright-eyed brunette that had walked by him every day twenty years before. She was gone forever, all

bouncing flesh and satin smoothness, gone with a world that had bred itself into oblivion. She no longer even existed in his mind uncorrupted, unaged, untouched.

Twenty-two years in one laboratory and one result, one three-month's stoppage in the deterioration of society. A simple invention that had foot-noted him into history. Gone in a season, bulging his credit number to meter out for the rest of his life.

One score. One hit. Dream time. Grab that dream, hold it, suck it, caress it, stroke it, look at it. Requisition the nerve from stores. Go back in time and pluck that dream from the street the instant before she started thinking of survival before pleasure.

Salvaged innocense, saving a dream before it is smashed.

Save the world before it goes zongo over the edge.

Go ahead, Nosseck, the old man said. Save it. Take your tiny tide-stopper and do something with it.

Oops, too late, it's gone.

"Sorry, old man, but your process has been rendered obsolete by the Farben GR-4. Too bad."

Lost chance to save the world.

Twenty years and ten seconds too late to save Adrienne.

Ten seconds too late to save the dream.

You saw her, you had her, you lost her. The *Now* her spoiled the *Then* her.

The old man sighed and looked up through the tangle of

crosswalks and zipways and advertising blinkers at the darkened sky. The sky was never fully dark anymore. Only the moon and a few of the brightest stars could ever be seen, or a rocket, going or coming.

The cities spread out until they touched, slowing erasing the earth, coating the planet with a hard, angular shell.

There are too many people, the old man thought. They tromple dreams and topple memories.

You can't go home again when you never had that home, the old man told himself.

A woman said something to him in French and the old man turned his head towards her politely. "I said, hullo, *mon ami*. Are you looking for a bit of talk, a bit of. . ." Her ambiguous gesture was precise enough. Her nipples were large and brown seen through the thin blouse, her eyes dilated with chemicals. Beyond her a redhead was resurfacing her face, hiding the beard that the hormones and operations never quite stopped growing. A distant siren wailed, a red streak in the dull gray rumble of the city at night.

The old man stuck his hands in his pockets to hide the tremors and he hunkered away into the deepening night, closing his ears to the myriad suggestions, closing his mind to the images.

The easy flesh, the bought flesh, those intimate personal services supplied by that ancient pro-

(cont. on page 108)

Richard Peck made his professional debut more than four years ago, in our companion magazine, FANTASTIC ("The Man Who Faded Away," June, 1971) and last appeared here with "Commuter Special" (January, 1972). In the interval he has developed his skills both as a writer and as a storyteller (by no means the same things) and now returns with a finely crafted tale about what it means, in the world of tomorrow, to be a—

DELIVERYMAN

RICHARD PECK

Illustrated by Tony Gleeson

IN THE PALE RED LIGHT of the briefing room Lee Roma's fingernails took on an eerie sheen. Only moments before he had swallowed two uppers, and now the sights and sounds of the room floated behind a mist as his own reflexes outraced sensory input. Coates' droning voice slowed to a bass growl. Roma recognized distortion—his own time sense, grown subjectively fleet. He tried to recall the "real" sound of Coates' whining tenor but couldn't. Real is what you make it. He focused on his glistening pink-fingernails and listened.

"... thing matters. Only one. Get the load through. Clear?"

Muttered assent.

"What?" Coates shouted. "I can't hear you."

"Yessir!" Ten voices in unison. Ten men clad only in sandals and trunks.

Coates nodded. "Check link-ups."

Like the others, in silent pantomime, Roma went through the ritual with automatic hands: glucose and stimulant receptor tubes hanging free on his groin; EKG stud uncapped; throat mike strapped tight around his neck (it rode on the quick beat of his pulse); EEG stud uncapped. His moist palm touched crotch, chest, throat, forehead, in a parody of salaam. And there were his nails again, hovering before his eyes in the hell-lit room.

"Roma! You with us or not?"

"Sir!"

"Educated nitwits." Coates talked to the ceiling in mock despair. "Why do I get them all?"

Several chuckles in the room; and Roma bit back an answer. A few hours more and it would be over. No more of Coates' riding him, no more of the constant needling: "Big deal, Roma. College man. What do we do now? Bow down and kiss your feet?"

Why's a guy like you want to be a deliveryman?" Always the same refrain. Singled out. One man, in a class of ten—the brunt of Coates' practiced sarcasm. But in a few hours that would be done with, over. Make this run, and then forget that he'd ever met Coates.

"All right. Last thing, now. I'll be riding with you all the way. Don't forget it. I've got the switch in my hand. One of you screws up, and that's the end. If you even *think* about leaving the Crawler, I'll hit the switch sure as hell. One thing matters to you: get this load through. One thing matters to me: the 'Skyers don't get one of the crawlers." Coates paused.

Closing his eyes, Roma felt the weight of Coates' stare and waited for the verbal attack—general harangue to the class, made specific for Roma. It never came.

"Well?" Coates posed with folded arms. "What are you waiting for? Want an escort? Man 'em." He spun and walked through the archway back into Central.

Roma pushed past two men hesitating at the door and broke into a trot down the darkened tunnel. The sooner there, the sooner done.

Ten Crawlers stood ranked in the exit bay, number ten—Roma's—farthest from the portal. Even as he palmed the lock and watched the hatch swing open he knew it was intentional. One



more of Coates' little games. Put Roma in his place, make him last to churn through the exit port. Last, and therefore the most exposed. The first Crawler out was safe enough—departure unscheduled, destination unknown. By the time ten passed through the port into the night, anyone lying in ambush would be more than ready to attack.

Roma shrugged and shook his arms limp to relax. He could handle it.

The heated swivel chair carressed Roma's bare skin as he settled into it, reshaping itself to his contours, becoming one with him. He smiled at the sensuality of the welcome. He reached down to activate the thermite charge in the base of the chair, then plugged in. EEG, mike jack, EKG, glucose and stimulant—and he was one with the Crawler, technically a cybernaut, in the jargon a "delivery-man."

"Not man. *Boy*. That's the word," Coates always said. At the beginning of every training session, as any candidate plugged into the jacks of the Crawler simulator. "*Boy*. One mistake and I hit the thermite switch. Don't forget it. You're mine, till I say otherwise."

"I won't forget it," Roma muttered.

"Talking to me, *Boy*?" Coates voice rasped in his ears. "Have you got something to say?"

"No sir."

"You look pretty nervous, you

know that? Your EEG's got a flutter in the Alpha. Why do you suppose that is?"

"Uppers, sir. They do it to me."

"All right. Let's pretend that's true. But if you get scared, *Boy*, let me know. We can recall you and send out a man."

Roma refused to be baited. He flipped on the viewer and checked 360 degrees. All cameras working. He saw the other nine Crawlers shuddering before him at idle. Internal check showed the cargo compartment hatch secured, all comm and defense systems in the green. He dropped his right hand into the control socket in the chair arm, and relaxed.

"Go!"

At Coates' shout the exit iris cycled and the first Crawler lurched out into the darkness.

"Fields! You're next. Move it!"

Number two churned forward on its treads, and the remaining eight closed the gap. As they inched forward into the night, Roma held a close interval on number nine and waited tensed for Coates' inevitable criticism.

The Crawler cabin crackled with blue static as it passed through the charged exit field, and then—

"Left! Left! Left! Where the hell you going, Roma? Left, I said."

Treads bit through the rubble piled outside and the Crawler swung heavily left to mount a small incline of brick and crum-

bled plaster. His night vision readied by the red lights of the briefing room, Roma ran a quick check of the narrow street ahead of him. No one. Empty. None of the ambushers he'd feared. His hand moved automatically, controlling direction and speed with a gimbal-mounted stick and twist-throttle combination. Just like the simulator. Like the hundreds of mock deliveries he had made during three months of incessant study, and practice, and drill. In his feet he felt the Crawler's treads grind inexorably over the trash-cluttered street; through the cab's audio he heard the roar of his own passage. And while he was one with the Crawler, Coates was nearly one with him.

"Calmer now, Roma? Think it's a piece of cake, do you? You're looking good on the gauges. But we'll fix that. Let me give you a route."

"Ready to copy, sir." Roma's free hand hovered over a keyboard in the left chairarm.

"Parkway to 35th, Wilton Bridge to the Armory, Bariss Street to 70th, 70th to Renault, Got it?"

"Renault? But that's—"

"I know where it is, *Boy*. Do you? I've got nine other incompetents on the board right now. I can't coddle you. Do you copy?"

"Sir."

"I'm watching. Go to it."

On the Crawler's instrument console a map of the city glowed lime green, overlaid now with a

pink line marking the route Roma had punched in. In his mind's eye he saw the entire city laid out with hard-edged clarity, a grid bisected by the diagonal twist of river squirming its way northeast to southwest. His route lay across the river toward the most distant corner of the mental map he now reviewed. It passed from the tower complex of City, through the exit port into the danger of Opensky, through Opensky into Working, and nearly to Suburbs. Almost fifteen miles, a full radius of the built-up area surrounding City itself. Fifteen miles, in a vehicle with a top speed of ten mph. A check of the clock confirmed his fears. Another hour of darkness at most; dawn would catch him well short of 70th and Renault, in the open, exposed to any attack the 'Skyers might mount.

He swung right onto the Parkway and opened the throttle. Full speed was impossible; he didn't dare outrun his infra red lights and heat sensors. But the more distance he could cover now, the less time he had to risk in daylight. The Parkway was cluttered with abandoned vehicles, some of them temporary homes at one time but empty since the chaos. He slewed around large obstacles, ran over, or through, smaller ones.

In a moment his actions had grown automatic, the result of hundreds of sessions in the simulator. His mind ticked over the alphabetical list of drop-points

until he reached "Renault and 70th." *Dole center; former bank; two permanent volunteer staff; class one zone-high risk drop-point.*

Coates had given him a beauty, first trip out of City. Okay. He could handle it. He shook his head—his neck ached fiercely from tension—and felt drops of perspiration sprinkle his bare arms. *Sweating?* He thumbed the temperature control lower and tried to relax. Nearly 0500. By now his parents would be having breakfast, safe in City towers. Where Roma could have stayed—*should* have stayed, his mother would say. . . .

A THREE-ROOM luxury apartment, but no more than the Romas' eminence deserved: Baird Roma, PhD (Chemistry), Director City Watersupply; Eileen Cohn-Roma, MD (Obstet), PhD (Microbiology), Co-Director PopPlanning; Lee Roma, BS (Ecosystems), unemployed. And that was the cause of their daily breakfast argument.

"Did you talk to Delivery?" Lee tried to make his question sound casual and unconcerned, but his mother's indrawn breath defined his failure.

"I meant to," his father said. "I just didn't get the chance." He scooped out a spoonful of soft-boiled egg and bent low to hide his lie.

"When will you get the chance? How long can it take?"

His mother pushed back from the table and nearly upset her chair. "Will you stop it! Both of you. I'm sick to death of this fencing, every morning the same thing. You first." She gestured at Baird. "Tell him the truth. We *won't* pull any strings to get him into Delivery, and that's the end of it."

Baird nodded with resignation. "Your mother's right, Lee. You know what the competition's like. Three, sometimes four men a day try to run the maze through Opensky. On foot! And when one of them makes it inside City, he's earned the right to a job. Why should you expect preferential treatment?"

"I don't. You know that. But what's left for me? I'm inside already. No one's going to let me out to try the maze, so what's left?"

"A *responsible* job." His mother glared at him, fighting back tears of anger and frustration. "Deliveryman! With your education? It's absurd! And that's not a proud mother speaking, either. You know that. You *both* know that. But you've seen the extrapolations. A few months, a year at the most, and we'll have Opensky pacified. We'll start the schools running again. We'll—"

"Uh-huh. I know the whole song and dance." Lee slumped in his chair, angry at his own pouting but sullen nevertheless. Whichever way he turned he faced a blank wall.

"That's enough!" Baird slammed his spoon to the table. "Apologize, and right now. Your mother is only concerned for you, and all we hear is sarcasm."

Flushed, Lee nodded. "You're right. I'm sorry. I really am. But you said we'd 'discuss' it. Will you listen to me?" He took their reluctant nods as a minor victory, then hesitated before beginning.

It wasn't a long speech, but it was carefully rehearsed. For weeks he had been sifting and winnowing, separating chaff from wheat, sorting and refining his arguments to condense them within the most logical framework he could devise. He claimed an expertise his parents lacked. They were specialists, the very sort in whom the only hope for City lay. But Lee was not. A generalist, he had tried synthesizing several disciplines. His formal course of study had been designated "Ecosystems." It might better be termed "the City." To his mind and imagination, City was alive, though moribund. It could be brought back to life.

"That's what *I've* been saying," his mother interrupted. "In PopPlanning you could—"

"Mother? Please."

Baird silenced her with a frown.

At the risk of boring them but determined to follow a single thread to the end, Lee summarized the chaos: collapse of the school system, of civil order, of public services, leading finally to mass riots and looting. There had

been rumors of cannibalism. Evidence replaced the rumors; City tightened security. And much of the problem—to Lee's mind—stemmed from simple facts of geography.

"Take a look out the window," he said. "You'll see what I mean. Oh, I know. You'll tell me you look every day. but you don't *see* it. Here we are, safe in City, all the managerial class. Circling City, the slums we euphemize as 'Opensky.' Open! There's nothing open about it: surrounded by the guarded factories in Working, locked out of City—no wonder the 'Skyers riot. Money and power, on one hand, but out of their reach. Jobs on the other hand, but not enough for everyone. And beyond Working, Suburbs! Luxury. *Real* open spaces—"

"Nonsense," his mother snapped. "That old commuter class is gone, and you know it. Take us. Didn't we move back? Aren't we here now, where our responsibilities lie? Suburbs are a myth. Only the farms and agronomy stations—"

"I know that. So do you. What about the 'Skyers? So long as they think there's a paradise out beyond Working, of course they'll rebel. My God! You're treating them like animals. We need to break down these barriers, not defend or redefine them."

Baird looked at his watch in an obvious attempt to cut off the ar-

gument. "Can we get to the end? How will your joining Delivery change anything? Isn't that the question?"

"It may not." As much as he hated the admission, Lee felt compelled to make it. His argument hinged on a truth he didn't want tainted by any deceit, not even one necessary to achieving his goal. Means and ends have to match. "But I think this is true. I may be the only one in City who really sees the problem. Not a solution, not yet, but the problem itself. City's the bullseye in a target. All those concentric rings out there have to merge, meld, blend together. I *think* that's true. If I can get outside, really participate, *feel* Opensky and what's it's like—maybe I'll *know*."

Eileen shook her head. "That's too facile. Nearly everyone now in Delivery came from Opensky, and you don't see any of them trying to get back outside City. They're—"

"Should I be a climber because they are? I know what security's like. It's farce, artifice. There's no security for us till it's available for the 'Skyers, too."

The argument droned on. And on. Only his final threat, saved for a desperate last attempt, had any effect: "I will go out. That's all there is. Now, if you can get me a chance to work in Delivery, fine. I'll go out legally. If not. . . ." He let the implication hang in the tense air between them.

And a week later, with all the

bad grace she could muster, Eileen told him it was arranged: Lee Roma, BS, a member of the new Delivery training class.

He moved out of his parents' apartment and into ten-man, two-room quarters, deep in the bowels of City. And into the hands of Coates.

"REPORT!"

Roma ran a quick exterior check before answering. "All clear. No problems. Now approaching Wilton Bridge."

"No problems? Pretty cocky, aren't you? Let me pose one. Say you cross the bridge, and there's a human barricade. Then what?"

Roma hesitated. He had the answer all right, the book solution, but it didn't come easily to his tongue.

"Well, *Boy*. Let's have it."

"Get the load through."

"I know that, you nit! How?"

Through clenched teeth, Roma snapped back, "Any way!"

"Will you do it? Through them? Over them, if you have to?"

"If I have to."

"We'll see. Get set. A report just came in from the Armory drop-point. 'Skyers massing two blocks from the bridge. An ugly crowd. Be ready."

"Sir."

The Crawler rumbled onto the bridge. Holes gaped in the twisted metal railing to his right. In two places the concrete flooring had heaved and buckled. Massive slabs leaned against each

other, pairs of mammoth playing cards propped tent-like on a huge tabletop. Roma swung right around the first obstruction, his outside tread grating along the retaining barrier over the river. Through the starboard cameras he saw only open water beneath. The stick grew mushy in his hands. The Crawler hung teetering a breathless moment, then lurched left onto solid footing.

The second obstruction was smaller. The Crawler climbed it and dropped slowly down the far incline. Roma twisted the throttle and thundered toward the west bank.

He flinched at the noise of his progress. Running with only infra red lights gave him partial security, but the engine's roar marked his location for anyone within a block or two. With a crowd gathering ahead, speed became more important than stealth.

A futile log barricade at the west end of the bridge splintered to shreds under the Crawler's weight. Roma checked defense systems again, more from nervousness than need, and watched the hulking Armory loom at him out of the drak. It was an inky silhouette against a sky brightening from dead black to dawn blue. A run to the Armory drop-point would end here. Roma's run stretched on miles farther.

Heat sensors picked up the crowd before they were visible. Roma switched his console map to closeup and focused on a four-

block square. A shifting clot of white marked the mass of bodies concealed beside the Armory. The white smear lay across the dotted red line of his route.

He hesitated, then locked his right tread, and the Crawler spun sharply off the street. It tore through a flimsy electrified fence and lumbered along the west riverbank. He knew there must be a way through the Armory grounds and around the building on the near side. He could avoid the massed crowd. Viewers showed him little but vague shadows ahead, river to the right, the massive shape of buildings to his left. No matter what shortcut he took the 'Skyers would hear the Crawler. Stealth was impossible now. He snapped on the carbon arc mounted on the Crawler's bow, and in the glaring white path ahead he saw obstruction. A pile of crates, cartons of some sort, lay between him and the cross street beyond the Armory lot. He opened the throttle and slammed through the stacked boxes. His viewers became kaleidoscopes of shifting shapes as the crates flipped back over the Crawler in a shower of shattered fragments. The Crawler slammed into a solid barrier. Hesitated. The engine screamed in protest, and then with a tearing sound it was through. And onto pavement.

He swung left and crept toward the shifting white blob on his console map. A block to Bariss Street. At full power he reached

the intersection mere seconds ahead of the ambushers. Now he could see them on the viewers—scores of them, shadows in the darkness boiling out of buildings and pouring toward him.

A skidding right turn and he was onto Bariss. He'd made it! Excitement surged through him as he activated the skirt fans and watched dust and debris whirl high in the air around him. Rushing forms nearest the Crawler were seized by a giant hand and hurled off their feet; the tornado he rode in swept them away like so many rag dolls caught before the wind.

Made it! Without harming anyone. *His* way. And the hell with Coates. His left hand pounded exultant rhythms on the chairarm. He shut down the fans and smiled at his success.

"Roma? What are you doing?" Coates sounded pained.

"On Bariss, proceeding toward 70th. I avoided the ambush." Lee couldn't keep the note of triumph out of his voice.

"I know that. Want to hear what else I know? I taped it, not two minutes ago. Listen."

A new voice entered the cabin, tense and angry. "Central! Central! What's going on? There's a Crawler outside the Armory drop-point, smashing through the storage yard. He's just about. . . . There! He did it! Tore the billy-blue-hell out of the clothing dump. It's not bad enough we've got to mount guards

. . . . Oh God! Now he smashed through the fence! Is that you at Central, Coates? You tell that idiot we'll be two days securing this place. And if I find out who it was, I'll. . . ."

"Heard enough, Roma?" Coates interrupted the taped complaint. "I gave you a route to follow. You think I was kidding? Or did you think at all?"

"I'll get the load through," Roma barked. "And they won't get the Crawler. The rest of it's up to me. You said so yourself."

"And you're the smart one of the bunch. Damn! Okay, *Boy*. We'll talk about it later."

FROM THEIR FIRST meeting on, Coates and Roma disagreed about means.

"If a Deliveryman can get through without harming anyone, that's his job too, isn't it?"

Coates faced the class and shook his head. "Always an argument, Roma. I might have known. All right. Say you can do that. Good. *But*, if it comes down to 'Skyers or your load, you're going to have to react."

"I can decide when it happens, sir."

"Not decide, dammit! React! If you've got this notion you can talk a mob out of cutting your throat, you're plain nuts. Ask the others. They've been there. They know."

Roma's nine classmates nodded, and their smugness—their assumption of superiority—only strengthened his determination.

"All right. So I haven't been out there yet. But you make the 'Skyers sound like a bunch of animals. If you'd treat them—"

Coates interrupted. "Not animals. No one ever said that. That's your word. They're people, right enough, but gone crazy. Not all of them. That's why there's still hope, because we *can* do something for most of them, *if* the loads get through. Understand that?"

"Sir."

"One more time, then. If you get stopped, if you're boxed in and it looks like the 'Skyers will get the Crawler, what happens?"

Resigned, Roma fell back on catechism. "Twenty seconds to disconnect and evacuate. Then Central activates the thermite."

"You've got it," Coates grinned. "And I'll be Central. The switch is in my hand. Be slow getting out and. . . ." It was always his final argument.

ROMA SQUIRMED in his chair. Deliverymen called it, with the gallows humor they all affected, the hot seat. For Lee it was more than that. It was a vantage point from which to test his preconceptions about Opensky. His whole run, still marked on the console before him but shortening now as he approached 70th Street, became a paradigm of his disagreement with Coates. If he could finish the run safely, his way, it would prove something. Like the child's game: if I don't step on a

crack all the way home, I'll get that new bike for my birthday. And now, if Roma could complete the run without any run-in or violence from the 'Skyers, it would prove him right, Coates wrong. The 'Skyers weren't a real menace, only misguided. Only people reacting to the challenge of power, and wealth, and authority, represented by the Crawlers themselves.

He reached 70th Street without incident. His spirits rose. And while the Crawler responded to the automatic gestures of his controlling hand, he began to formulate a plan. What would happen if deliveries were made openly, without all this secrecy and flaunted power? When he got back, he would suggest it.

Daylight was a milky silence outside the Crawler. Here in Working he saw the lighted factories on each side, smoke belching from chimneys, the steets cleared, wide, and empty. He straddled an invisible line down the center of the street and thundered on toward Renault. Once, passing a factory entrance, he saw the armed watchmen raise gloved hands in greeting, their faces hidden behind the gasmasks necessary in the fetid air. Ash lifted fluttering on the breeze of his passage. Yellow sulfur clouds poured from a pair of stacks to his left.

With a grin, Roma flicked the mike switch. "Crawler ten, here."

"Central here. What's the prob-

lem?"

"No problem, Central. Position report. On 70th, a mile from Ranault. All routine. No difficulty."

"You had to say it, right Roma? I've got seven Crawlers out, and you had to interrupt to brag. What do you know about 'routine'? Now get the hell off the horn!"

"Sir." His grin widened. Why not rub it in a little? Coates never missed a chance. Let him take what he dished out.

Through Opensky, into the security of Working, Roma could now afford to relax. He shut down the heat sensors, unnecessary in full daylight, and relied on the viewers. Humming to himself, he slid into an angled bend in the street. He locked first one tread, then the other, but kept the throttle open. And the Crawler danced around the sharp corner, slamming right-left-right. He slid out of the angle. And into a cul-de-sac.

He locked both treads and skewed to a shuddering stop. This was wrong! The street should have continued on through, but fifty feet ahead of him stood a two-story brick wall. Momentarily bewildered, he reviewed his mental map of 70th Street—a thoroughfare, kept open and unobstructed, or so Coates had taught them.

That sharp bend in the street, that was it. Roma had somehow swung off 70th and into this

deadend.

He stood on the right tread lock and opened the throttle to spin back the way he'd come. There, lying in the street, was a young girl writhing in pain. Instantly the entire scene etched itself on his mind: a girl in workclothes, looked about 16, right leg twisted underneath her. Left leg . . . gone. Missing! A pink smear on the pavement. And her arms flailing. Only then did he hear her crying out in pain. He'd done it, run her down with the Crawler roaring blindly into this cul-de-sac. Crippled.

Vomit splashed over his bare thighs and he heard the shaking in his hands as the engine whined to overspeed and died under the surging throttle he twisted unknowingly. He acted instantly. Without thinking he snatched loose the four linkages that tied him to Central, palmed open the hatch, and staggered over the side toward the girl.

Through the roaring in his ears he heard an unintelligible voice from the Crawler cabin, then felt something—someone—hit him behind the knees and hurl him to the cold pavement. Commotion filled the street—silent running bodies bursting on him from all sides, then past him to the Crawler. He rolled onto his side to rise. Through the silent melee he saw the girl lifted erect by two men, handed crutches on which she moved to the corner with practiced grace.

He scrambled to his feet to shout after her but she didn't look back. He took one tentative step and then a soft *thump* whirled him around.

The Crawler cabin spewed white smoke. One man leapt from the smoke with his hair a smouldering mass. He lay screaming in the street while a boy batted at his flaming crown. Still the mob worked silently. The rear cargo hatch popped open. They passed large cartons from hand to hand, snatching them up and tossing them free from the flames that rose to engulf the Crawler.

Roma ran. He ran with the fear of death at his back and a strength of panic he didn't understand, ran from the cul-de-sac, along a cross street, behind a crumbling wall, and out again onto 70th.

LATER, he remembered nothing of the distance he had run, only the cold air biting at his bare skin, and the imagined sound of footsteps at his back. The crew at the Renault drop-point, warned by Coates, recognized Roma in his scant trunks. They took him inside where—an hour later—he had calmed enough to talk.

"Kid. Coates is gonna have your hide." The older of the two men at Renault sat facing Lee over a small table. "You know what a Crawler costs?"

"Screw the Crawler. What about them?" The second man sat at a bank of screens and indicated

a line of quiet people in the street outside. "Tell him, Klema. How long they been waiting out there?"

The older man nodded. "Baker's right. We're at the end of the line out here. Only three loads a week for us, and now you cost us this one."

Roma flushed. "Okay. I know that. But I couldn't—"

"And you were gonna be one of the good ones, Coates told us. You know what happens now?" Klema rose to indicate the queue of people outside. "They been coming here, some of them, for months. But just once we can't supply 'em, they'll get what they want from the 'Skyers. We lost 'em, now. You lost 'em."

"It wasn't much," Roma muttered. "Most of the load burned before they could get it out."

"Wonderful!" Baker shook his head. "That's great. And I'll bet you don't even know what the load was."

"Nobody told me."

"Ahh, hell!" Baker turned away in disgust.

Klema looked puzzled. "All you had to do was ask. Didn't that matter to you? What was this—some kind of game? You didn't even ask Coates what you were carrying?"

"What does it matter now?" Lee couldn't look at them.

"Ahh, hell! See what I mean?" Baker spun away from the screen and stalked out of the room. "Keep him away from me, Klema."

I don't even want to see him. Soft-headed kid."

The older man shrugged. "Maybe you're right, Roma. Maybe it doesn't matter. Milk. You had a ton of powdered milk. We been out of it for over a week."

"Milk!" It was Lee's turn to be angry. "I risked my life for *milk*?"

"They do." Klema waved at the screen.

"But it could have been something *important*! A run that long, for milk?"

After a long moment, Klema said, "There'll be another run in two days. You can go back to City with him."

"Go back? What for? Why should I—"

"Because you're not worth a damn out here. And if I was you, I wouldn't talk to Baker till then. People who mess up aren't his best friends, you know? Even smart people and volunteers."

"What about you?" Roma's question sounded like a plea. "You're in charge here. What do you think?"

Klema shrugged. "I just do a job, kid. Counseling's out of my line." He went after Baker.

Roma stared at the screen, and at the line of people waiting outside.

—RICHARD E. PECK

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Someone had drugged him, stolen his memory, and shipped him half-way across the Alastor Cluster. Why? To what purpose had he been stripped of his identity as a proud Rhune?

MARUNE: ALASTOR 933

JACK VANCE

Conclusion

Illustrated by Steve Fabian

SYNOPSIS

EFRAIM, House of Benbuphar, Kang of the Realm, now—with the death of his father, JOCHAIM, the seventy-ninth Kaiark—Eightieth Kaiark, has a problem. Someone did something to him which cost him his memory, then shipped him out with an open ticket to become a lost wanderer on one of the many worlds of the Alastor Cluster. He was found where his ticket ran out, on Bruse-Tansel, Alastor 1102. He made his way to the Connatic's Hospital no Numenes, where all efforts to restore his memory to him failed, but characteristics of his body combined with logistical searches of the probable route which took him to Bruse-Tansel do establish his planet of origin. He is a Rhune from the Rhune Realms, east of Port Mar on the North Continent of Marune, Alastor 933.

Marune is a planet which exists in a four-star group, orbiting close around the orange dwarf star, Furad. Also in the group are a green star, Cirse; a blue dwarf, Osmo; and a red dwarf, Maddar. Maddar and Cirse swing close around each other; Furad, with Marune keeping its monthly orbit, curvets around Osmo. On Marune

day and night do not alternate; instead there are varying conditions of light, depending upon which sun or suns rule the sky, and these periods are specifically designated. Aud, isp, red rowan, green rowan and umber are the normal gradations. Night occurs at intervals regulated by a complex pattern, averaging about once every thirty days.

Most of the planet is poorly adapted to human habitation and the population is small, divided about equally between agriculturists on the lowland slopes and residents of the several cities, of which Port Mar is by far the most important. East of Port Mar are the Mountain Realms, inhabited by aloof and eccentric warrior-scholars known as Rhunes, whose numbers are not accurately known. The native fauna includes a quasi-intelligent biped of placid disposition: the Fwai-chi. These creatures inhabit highland forests and are protected from molestation both by statute and by local custom.

The planet was originally settled by the Majars and the Rhunes, and was known as Majar-Rhune, but the Rhunes decimated the Majars, and were expelled by the Whelm into the eastern mountains, where they are

still allowed no weapons of energy or attack.

Efraim learns what he can about Rhune society:

"In the Old Town at Port Mar live a handful of exiles: young Rhunes who have rebelled against their society, or who have been ejected for lapses of conduct. They are a demoralized, miserable and bitter group; all criticize their parents, who, so they claim, have withheld counsel and guidance. To a certain extent this is true; Rhunes feel that their precepts are self-evident even to the understanding of a child—which of course they are not; nowhere in the Cluster are conventions more arbitrary. For instance, the process of ingesting food is considered as deplorable as the final outcome of digestion, and eating is done as privately as possible. The child is supposed to achieve this viewpoint automatically, as well as other Rhune conventions. He is expected to excel in arcane and impractical skills; he must quell his sebalism."

"You have used this word before; I do not understand it."

"It is the special Rhune concept for 'secuality', which the Rhunes find disgusting. How then do they procreate? It is cause for wonder. But they have solved the problem with elegance and ingenuity. During mirk, in the dark of the suns, they undergo a remarkable transformation. Do you wish to hear about it? If so, you must allow me a measure of discursiveness, as the subject is most wonderful!

"About once a month, the land grows dark, and the Rhunes become restless. Some lock themselves into their homes; others array themselves in odd costumes and go forth into the night where they perform the most astonishing deeds. The baron whose rectitude is unquestioned robs and



beats one of his tenants. A staid matron commits daring acts of unmentionable depravity. No one who allows himself to be accessible is safe. What a mystery then! How to reconcile such conduct with the decorum of daylight? No one tries to do so; night-deeds are considered hardships for which no one is held responsible, like nightmares. Mirk is a time of unreality; events during mirk are unreal, and 'guilt' has no basis.

"During mirk, sebalism is rampant. Indeed, sexual activity occurs only as a night-deed, only in the guise of rape. Marriage—'trisme,' as it is called—is never considered a sexual pairing, but rather an alliance; a joining of economic or political forces. Sexual acts, if they occur, will be 'night-deeds'—acts of purported rape. The male participant wears a black garment over his shoulders, arms and upper chest, and boots of black cloth. Over his head he wears a 'man-mask'. His torso is naked. He is purposely grotesque, an abstraction of male sexuality; his costume depersonalizes himself and maximizes the 'fantasy' or 'unreal' elements. The man enters the chamber where the woman sleeps, or pretends to sleep; and in utter silence procreation occurs. Virginity or its absence is neither significant, nor so much as a subject for speculation; the Rhune dialect contains no such word.

"So there you have the state of 'trisme'. Between trismetics friendship may exist, but the two address each other formally. Intimacy between any two people is rare. Rooms are large, so that folk need not huddle together, nor even approach. No person purposely touches another; in fact the occupations which require physical contact, such as barbering, doctoring, clothes-fitting, are considered pariah trades. For such services the

Rhunes journey into Port Mar. A parent neither strikes nor caresses his child; a warrior attempts to kill his enemy at a distance, and weapons such as swords and daggers have only ceremonial function.

"Allow me to revert to the act of eating. On those rare occasions when a Rhune is forced to dine in the company of others he ingests his food behind a napkin, or at the back of a table implement unique to Marune: a screen on a metal pedestal, placed before the diner's face. At formal banquets no food is served: only wafts of varied and complicated odors, the selection and presentation being considered a creative skill.

"The Rhunes lack humor. They are highly sensitive to insult; a Rhune will never submit to ridicule. Lifelong friends must reckon with each other's sensibilities, and rely upon a complicated etiquette to lubricate social occasions. In short, it seems as if the Rhunes deny themselves all the usual human pleasures. What do they substitute?

"In the first place, the Rhune is exquisitely sensitive to his landscapes of mountain, meadow, forest and sky, all changing to the changing modes of day. He reckons his land by its aesthetic appeal; he will connive a lifetime to gain a few choice acres. He enjoys pomp, protocol, heraldic minutiae; his niceties and graces are judged as carefully as the figures of a ballet. He prides himself on his collection of sherliken scales; or the emeralds which he has mined, cut and polished with his own hands; or his Arah magic wheels, imported from halfway across the Gaean Reach. He will perfect himself in special mathematics, or an ancient language, or the lore of fanfares, or all three, or three other abstrusities. His callig-

raphy and draughtsmanship are taken for granted; his life work is his Book of Deeds, which he executes and illustrates and decorates with fervor and exactitude. A few of these books have reached the market; in the Reach they command enormous prices as curios.

"The Rhune is not a likeable man. He is so sensitive as to be truculent; he is contemptuous of all other races than the Rhune. He is self-centered, arrogant, unsympathetic in his judgments.

"Naturally I allude to the typical Rhune, from whom an individual may deviate, and everything I have said applies no less to the women as the men.

"The Rhunes display correspondingly large virtues: dignity, courage, honor, intellects of incomprehensible complexity—though here again individuals may differ from the norm.

"Anyone who owns land considers himself an aristocrat, and the hierarchy descends from kaiark, through kang, eiodark, baronet, baron, knight and squire. The Fwai-chi have retreated from the Realms, but still make their pilgrimages through the upper forests and along the high places. There is no inter-action between the two races.

"Needless to say, among a people so passionate, proud and reckless, and so anxious to expand their land-holdings, conflict is not unknown. The force of the Connatic's Second Edict and, more effectively, an embargo upon energy weapons, has eliminated formal war, but raids and forays are common, and enmities last forever. The rules of warfare are based upon two principles. First, no man may attack a person of higher rank than himself; second, since blood violence is a mirk-deed, killing is achieved at a

distance with blast-bolts; aristocrats, however use swords and so demonstrate fortitude. Ordinary warriors will not look a man in the face and kill him; such an act haunts a man forever—unless the act's done by mirk, when it becomes no more than a nightmare. But only if unplanned. Premeditated murder by mirk is vile murder."

"Now I know why my enemy sent me off to Bruse-Tansel instead of leaving me dead in a ditch."

"There is a second argument against murder: it cannot be concealed. The Fwai-chi detect crimes, and no one escapes; it is said that they can taste a dead man's blood and cite all the circumstances of his death."

Armed now with some knowledge of what—if not who—he is, Efraim returns to Marune, where he finds recognition at the Royal Rhune Hotel in Port Mar, and his true name and identity are restored to him. With this comes the knowledge that his father has died, and that he is now Kaiark of Scharrode—a title he must claim soon if it is not to pass into other hands.

As he begins to unravel the events which led to the loss of his memory, he finds they center upon a visit to Port Mar by his father, the late Kaiark Jochaim, in the company of the Kraike SINGHALISSA, the Kangs Efraim and DESTIAN, and the Lissolet STHELANY—Destian and Sthelany are the son and daughter of Singhalissa, who had formed trisme with Efraim's father. Also visiting Port Mar and staying at the Royal Rhune was a second party, headed by the Kaiark RIANLLE of Eccord, with the Kraike DERVAS and the Lissolet MAERIO.

The younger members of the party—Efraim, Destian, Sthelany and

Maerio—set out to explore the New Town and joined company with a fellow named MATHO LORCAS, whom Efraim now seeks out.

Lorcas is friendly and fills in Efraim as best he can on the activities of the day in question; he seems to find Rhune habits and customs amusingly inhibited and strange. He takes Efraim to a shop where the shopkeeper, a dealer in cures and potions, guesses that someone has fed Efraim Fwai-chi shag—an excretion of the Fwai-chi which has drug-like properties when consumed by humans, and can blot away human memory. He is unaware of any cure for the drug—or restorative for Efraim's lost memories.

Efraim decides he must journey to Scharrode, first to claim his title and second to get to the bottom of the mystery of what was done to him. Lorcas decides to accompany him, never having visited the Rhune mountain realms before.

Chapter 6

DURING EARLY ISP Efraim arrived at the office of the local air transport service, to find that Lorcas had already hired an air-car, of no great elegance, its metal-work stained by long exposure to the elements, the glass of the dome clouded, the flanges around the pods cratered and corroded. Lorcas said apologetically: "It's the best available, and quite dependable; in a hundred and two years the engine has never failed, or so I'm told."

With a skeptical eye Efraim surveyed the vehicle. "If it flies us to Scharrode, I don't care what it looks like."

"Sooner or later the craft will collapse, most likely in mid-air. Still—the alternative is shank's mare along the Fwai-chi trails. The terrain is most impressive, nor would you make so dignified an arrival."

"There is something in what you say," Efraim admitted. "Are you ready to leave?"

"At any time. But let me make a suggestion. Why not telephone Benbuphar Strang, to prepare them for your coming?"

"So that someone can fly out and shoot us down?"

Lorcas shook his head. "Air-cars are banned to the Rhunes, for just this reason. The present issue is one of dignity, and if I may presume to advise you, a Kaiark announces his arrival so that a formal reception may be arranged. I will speak for you, as your aide, which will lend dignity to the occasion."

"Very well, do as you like."

"The Kraike Singhalissa is now the head of the household?"

"So I would suppose."

At a telephone as antiquated as the air-car, Lorcas put through a call to Benbuphar Strang.

A footman in a black and scarlet uniform responded. "I speak for Benbuphar Strang. Please state your business."

"I want a few words with the Kraike Singhalissa," said Lorvas. "I have important information to transmit."

"You must call at some other time. The Kraike is in consulta-

tion regarding the investiture."

"Investiture? Of whom?"

"Of the new Kaiark."

"And who will this be?"

"The present Kang Destian, who is next in order of succession."

"And when does the investiture occur?"

"In one week's time, when the present Kaiark is to be declared derelict."

Lorcas laughed. "You may inform the Kraike that the investiture may be canceled, since Kaiark Efraim is immediately returning to Scharrode."

The footman stared into the screen. "I cannot take responsibility for such an announcement."

Efraim stepped forward. "Do you recognize me?"

"Ah, Force*, indeed I do!"

"Deliver the message as you heard it from the Noble Matho Lorcas."

"Instantly, Force!" The footman inclined himself in a stiff bow, and faded in a dazzle of halations.

The two returned to the air-car and clambered aboard. Without ceremony the pilot clamped the ports, opened the throttle and the ancient air-craft, creaking and vibrating, lurched up and away to the east.

*The term *tsernifer*, here translated as 'Force', refers to that pervasion of psychological power surrounding the person of a kaiark. The word is more accurately rendered as *irresistible compulsion, elemental wisdom, depersonalized force*. The appellative 'Force' is an insipid dilution.

With the pilot, who identified himself as Tiber Flaussig, talking over his shoulder and ignoring both altimeter and the terrain below, the air-craft cleared the ridges of the First Scarp with a hundred yards to spare. As if by afterthought the pilot lifted the craft somewhat higher, although the land at once fell away a thousand feet to become an upland plain. A hundred sprawling lakes reflected the clouds; scaur and deep-willow grew in isolated copses, with here and there a gnarled catafalque tree. Thirty miles east the Second Scarp thrust crags of naked rock up past the clouds. Flaussig, discussing certain outcrops below, declared them rich sources of such gems as tourmaline, peridot, topaz, and spinel: all barred from human exploitation by reason of Fwai-chi prejudice. "They claim this as one of their holy places, and so reads the treaty. They care no more for the jewels than for common stones; but they can smell a man from fifty miles away and lay on him their curse of a thousand itches, or a fiery bladder, or piebald skin. The area is now avoided."

Efraim pointed ahead to the looming scarp. "In a single minute we will all be crushed to pulp, unless you quickly raise this craft at least two thousand feet."

"Ah yes," said Flaussig. "The scarp approaches, and we will give it due respect." The air-car rose at a stomach-gripping rate,

and from the engine box came a stuttering wheeze which caused Efraim to twist about in alarm. "Is this vehicle finally disintegrating?"

Flaussig listened with a puzzled frown. "A mysterious sound certainly, one which I have not heard before. Still, were you as old as this vehicle, your viscera would also produce odd noises. Let us be tolerant of the aged."

As soon as the craft once more flew a level course the disturbing sounds dwindled into silence. Lorcas pointed ahead toward the Third Scarp, still fifty miles ahead. "Start now to ascend, in a gradual manner. The air-car is more likely to survive such treatment."

Flaussig acceded to the request, and the vehicle rose at a gradual angle to meet the prodigious bulk of the Third Scarp. Below passed a desolation of ridges, cols, chasms, and, rarely, a small forested valley. Flaussig waved his hand around the fearsome landscape. "Within the range of vision, around the whole of the cataclysmic tumble, live perhaps twenty fugitives: desperados, condemned criminals and the like. Commit no crimes in Port Mar or here is where you will eventuate."

Neither Lorcas nor Efraim saw fit to comment.

A cleft appeared; the air-car glided through with rock walls close to right and left and great buffets of wind thrusting the craft from side to side; then the cleft fell away and the air-car flew over

a landscape of peaks, cliffs and river valleys. Flaussig waved his hand in another inclusive arc. "The Realms, the glorious Realms! Beneath us now Waierd, guarded by the Soldiers of Silence . . . And now we fly across the realm Sherras. Notice the castle in the lake . . ."

"How far to Scharrode?"

"Yonder, over the crags. That is the answer given to all such questions. Why do you visit a place so dour?"

"Curiosity, perhaps."

"You'll learn nothing from them; they're as tight as stones, like all Rhunes . . . Below now and behind those great trees is the town Tangwill, home to no more than two or three thousand. The Kaiark Tangissel is said to be insane for women, and keeps captives in deep dungeons where they don't know whether or not it is mirk, and he visits them during all the periods of the month, except during mirk, when he's off on his prowling."

"Nonsense," muttered Efraim, but the pilot paid no heed.

"The great spire to the left is called Ferkus—"

"Up, man, up!" screamed Lorcas. "You're running us into the ridge!"

With a petulant gesture Flaussig jerked the air-craft high, to skim that crag to which Lorcas had made reference; for a period he flew in sullen silence. Below the ground rose and fell, and Flaussig, disdaining further al-

titude, veered back and forth among crystalline crags, grazed precipices, skirted glaciers and mounds of scree, the better to display his insouciant control over air-craft, landscape and passengers. Lorcas made frequent expositions, which Flaussig ignored, and at last guided the air-car down into an irregular valley three to four miles wide and fifteen miles long. At the eastern end a cascade fell two thousand feet into a lake, with nearby the town Esch. Away from the lake flowed a slow river, curving across a meadow and under Benbuphar Strang, then back and forth from pool to pool to the far western end of the valley, where it departed through a narrow gorge.

Near Esch the valley had been tamed to cultivation; the fields were enclosed by dense hedges of bramble berry, as if to hide them from view. In other such fields grazed cattle, while the slopes to either side of the valley were planted to orchards. Elsewhere meadows alternated with forests of banice, white oak, shrack, interstellar yew; through the clear air the foliages—dark green, crimson, sooty ocher, pale green—glowed like colors painted on black velvet. Efraim half-smiled to the fleeting brush of a sudden poignant emotion. Perhaps an exhalation from his occluded memory? Such twinges had been occurring with increasing frequency. He glanced at Lorcas to find him also staring about in wistful

wonder. "I have heard how the Rhunes cherish each stone of the landscape," said Lorcas. "The reason is clear. The Realms are small segments of Paradise."

Flaussig, having unloaded the scanty luggage, now stood in an expectant attitude. Lorcas spoke with slow and careful diction. "The fee was prepaid in Port Mar. The management wished to make sure of their money, no matter what else happened."

Flaussig smiled politely. "In circumstances like the present, a gratuity is usually extended."

"'Gratuity?'" exclaimed Efraim in a passion. "You are lucky to escape a penalty for criminal ineptitude!"

"Further," said Lorcas, "remain here until his Force the Kaiark permits you to leave. Otherwise he will order his secret agent in Port Mar to meet you and break every bone in your body."

Flaussig bowed in a state of injured dignity. "It shall be as you wish. Our firm has built its reputation upon service. Had I known I was transporting grandes of Scharrode, I would have used more formality, since appropriate behavior is also a watchword at our firm."

Lorcas and Efraim had already turned toward Benbuphar Strang, a castle of black stone, umber tile, timber and stucco, built to the dictates of that peculiar gaunt style typical of the Rhunes. The chambers of the first floor were enclosed by walls thirty feet high,

with tall narrow windows, elaborating above into a complicated system of towers, turrets, promenades, bays, balconies and eyries. This was home, mused Efraim, and this was terrain over which he had walked a thousand times. He looked westward along the valley, across the pools and meadows, past the successive silhouettes of the forests, the colors muted by the haze, until they became purple-gray shadow under the far crags: he had looked across this vista ten thousand times . . . He felt no recollection.

He had been recognized from the town. Several dozen men in black jackets and buff pantaloons hurried forth, with half as many women in gray gauze gowns.

The men, approaching, performed complicated gestures of respect, then came forward, halting at a distance precisely reckoned by protocol.

Efraim asked, "How have things gone during my absence?"

The most venerable of the men responded: "Tragically, Force: our Kaiark Jochaim was pierced by a Gorget bolt. Otherwise not badly, but not well. There have been doubts and misgivings, From Torre a band of warriors invaded our land. The Kang Destian ordered out a force, but there was little correspondence in rank*; and no great combat ensued. Our blood boils for revenge upon Gosso of Gorgetto. The Kang Destian has delayed retaliation; when will he order forth our power?

Remember, from the crest of Haujefolge our sails command his castle. We can invade, then while Gosso sweats and wheezes, we can drop down a force and take Gorgance Strang."

"First things first," said Efraim.

"I now go to Benbuphar Strang to discover what irregularities, if any, exist. Have you information, or even suspicions, in this regard?"

The sage performed another gesticulation of a ritual effacement. "I would never reflect upon Benbuphar irregularities, let alone give them voice."

"Do so now," said Efraim. "You

*Rhune warfare is controlled by rigid convention. Several types of engagement are recognized. In formal combat, fighting occurs between persons of equal rank. If a person of high caste attacks one of low caste, the low caste person may protect, retreat, or retaliate. If a low caste person attacks a person of high caste, he is reprimanded by everyone. The weapons employed are swords, used only for thrusting, and lances.

On occasion the raiders come masked; they are then known as 'mirk-men' and treated as bandits. All weapons may be legitimately used against mirk-men, including the so-called 'bore' which propels a short arrow or bolt, by means of an explosive charge.

Occasionally large-scale battles occur, when the total manpower of one Realm is mobilized against that of another.

Warriors trained to the use of sky-sails command special prestige. The rules of sky-fighting are even more complex than those governing warfare afoot.

will be doing your Kaiark a service."

"As you will, Force, but remember, by the nature of things, we of the town know nothing. Uncharitable persons blink asstance at the Kraike Singhalissa's projected trisme with Kaiark Rianlle of Eccord."

"What?" exclaimed Efraim. "And how is it to be with the Kraike Dervas?"

"She is to be resticated, or so goes the rumor. Such is Singhalissa's price for the Dwan Jar, where Rianlle yearns to build a pavilion. This at least is common knowledge. We learn also of trisme between the Kang Destian and the Lissolet Maerio. If these trismes were to eventuate, what then? Does it not seem that Rianlle would sit high in the counsels of Scharrode? Still, now that you are at hand, and Kaiark by right, the question is moot."

"I am pleased with your candor," said Efraim. "What else has occurred during my absence?"

"Nothing of consequence, although, in my opinion, the mood of the realm has become slack. Loons and villains wander by mirk, instead of remaining at home to guard their households, and then when light returns, we are reluctant to unbolt our doors, for fear of finding a corpse on the porch. Again, now that you are home, the evil influences must subside."

He bowed and withdrew; Efraim and Lorcas proceeded across

the commons toward the castle, after first dismissing the sullen Flaussig and sending him back to Port Mar.

As they approached, a pair of heralds appeared on the twin bartizans over the portal; lifting coiled bronze sad-horns they blew a set of agitated fanfares. The portals swung wide; a platoon of guards stood at attention, and out marched four heralds playing further fanfares: wild excited progressions of sounds, just perceptibly contrapuntal.

Efraim and Lorcas passed through a vaulted tunnel into a courtyard. In a tall-backed chair sat the Kraike Singhalissa; beside her stood the Kang Destian, dark eyebrows lowering.

The Kraike rose to her feet, to stand almost as tall as Destian: a woman of obvious force, with lustrous eyes and angular features. A gray turban contained her dark hair; her gray gauze gown seemed dull and characterless until the eye took note of the subtle play of light, the shadow of the half-concealed figure.

Singhalissa spoke in a high sweet voice: "We give you a ritual welcome, although you have returned at an inconvenient time; why should we deny it? In less than a week the legitimacy of your tenure would have dissolved, as certainly you have instructed yourself. It seems far from civil that you have neglected to notify us of your plans, inasmuch as we have providently taken steps to

transfer the succession."

"Your points are well-taken," said Efraim. "I could not dispute them if they were not founded upon incorrect premises. I assure you that my difficulties have far exceeded yours. Nevertheless, I am sorry that you have been inconvenienced and I sympathize with Destian's disappointment."

"No doubt," said Destian. "May we inquire the circumstances of your long absence?"

"Certainly; you are entitled to an explanation. At Port Mar I was drugged, placed aboard a spaceship, and sent far off across the Cluster. I encountered many difficulties and succeeded in returning to Port Mar only yesterday. As soon as possible I hired an air-car and was conveyed to Scharrode."

Destian's mouth compressed even deeper at the corners. He shrugged and turned away.

"Most curious," said Singhalissa, in her high clear voice. "Who worked this malignant deed?"

"I will discuss the matter with you in detail, at some future time."

"As you please." She inclined her head toward Lorcas. "And who is this gentleman?"

"I wish to present my friend, the Noble Matho Lorcas. He has given me invaluable assistance and will be our guest. I believe that he and the Kang Destian became casually acquainted at Port Mar."

Destian scrutinized Lorcas a

brief three seconds, then, muttering something under his breath, he turned away. Lorcas said gravely, "I recall the occasion perfectly; it is a pleasure to renew the acquaintance."

At the back of the colonnade, in the shadow of one of the tall portals, the form of a young woman seemed gradually to materialize. Efraim saw her to be the Lissolet Sthelany, slight and supple in her nimbus of translucent gray gauze. Her eyes, like those of the Kraike, were somber and lustrous, but her features were pensive rather than minatory, delicate rather than crisp, and only remotely similar to those of either Singhalissa or Destian. She was further differentiated by her expression of detachment and indifference. Efraim and Lorcas both might have been strangers for all the animation of her greeting. Lorcas had found Sthelany fascinating at Port Mar, and his interest, so Efraim noticed, had not diminished—almost too obviously, although no one troubled to take note.

Singhalissa, sensing Sthelany's presence, spoke over her shoulder. "As you see, the Kaiark Efraim is again with us. He has suffered outrageous indignities; some unknown person has played him a series of malicious tricks."

"Indeed!" remarked Sthelany in a soft voice. "I am dismayed to hear this. Still, one cannot expect to roam the back alleys of Port Mar and evade the consequences.

As I recall, he was in the most questionable company."

"We are all disturbed by the situation," said Singhalissa. "The Kaiark of course has our sympathy. He has brought as his guest the Noble Matho Lorcass, or so I believe his name to be: his friend from Port Mar."

Lissolet's acknowledgment of the introduction, if any less emphatic, would have been undetectable. She spoke to Efraim in a voice as clear and sweet as that of Singhalissa, "Who performed these heartless acts upon you?"

Singhalissa answered for Efraim. "The Kaiark prefers not to enlarge upon the matter at this time."

"But we are most interested! These indignities offend us all!"

"That is true enough," said the Kraike.

Efraim had been listening with a sour grin. "I can tell you very little. I am as puzzled as you are—perhaps more so."

"More so? I know nothing."

The Kraike said abruptly, "The Kaiark and his friend have had a fatiguing journey and will wish to refresh themselves." She addressed herself to Efraim. "I assume that you will now occupy the Grand Chambers?"

"It would seem appropriate that I do so."

Singhalissa turned and beckoned to a grizzled heavy-shouldered man who wore, over the black and scarlet Benbuphar livery, a black velvet mantle em-

broidered in silver and a black velvet tricorne cap. "Agnois, bring a selection of the Kaiark's effects down from the North Tower."

"At once, Your Presence." Agnois the First Chamberlain departed.

The Kraike Singhalissa ushered Efraim along a dim hall hung with portraits of all the dead kaiarks, each, by the urgency of his gaze and the poise of his upraised hand, straining to communicate his wisdom across the ages.

A pair of tall iron-bound doors barred the way, with a gorgon's head of oiled black iron at the center of each: perhaps contrived by a Kaiark's cogence*. Singhalissa halted by the doors; Efraim stepped forward to fling them wide but could not discover the mechanism which controlled the latch. Singhalissa said drily, "Allow me," and pressed a boss; the doors swung open.

They entered a long antechamber, or trophy room. Cases lined the walls, displaying curios, collections, artifacts; objects of stone, wood, fired clay, glass; insects preserved in transparent cubes; sketches, paintings, calligraphy; Books of Life, a thousand other volumes and portfolios, monographs unnumbered. A long table occupied the center of the room, on which glowed a pair of lamps in green glass shades. Above the cases portraits of

*The word *cogence* is used to express that fervent erudition and virtuosity of the Rhunes.

kaiarks and kraikes stared down at those who passed below.

The trophy room opened on a vast high-ceilinged room paneled in wood almost black with age. Rugs patterned in maroon, blue, and black covered the floor; tall narrow windows overlooked the valley.

The Kraike indicated a dozen cases along the wall. "These are Destian's belongings; he assumed that he would be occupying these chambers; he is naturally annoyed by the turn of events." She stepped to the wall and touched a button; almost at once Agnois the First Chamberlain appeared. "Yes, Your Presence?"

"Remove the Kang Destian's belongings."

"At once, Presence." He departed.

"How, may I ask, did the Kaiark meet his death?"

The Kraike looked sharply at Efraim. "You have heard nothing of this?"

"Only that he was killed by the Gorgets."

"We know little more. They came as mirk-men and one of them shot a bolt at Jochaim's back. Destian planned a foray of vengeance immediately after his investiture."

"Destian can order a foray whenever he chooses. I will put no hindrance in his way."

"You intend not to participate?" The Kraike's clear voice tinkled with a cool emotion.

"I would be foolish to do so,

while there are mysteries to be clarified. Who knows but what I also might die of a Gorget bolt?"

"You must act as your wisdom directs. When you are rested you will find us in the hall. With your permission I will now leave you."

Efraim bowed his head. "I am grateful for your solicitude."

The Kraike departed. Efraim stood alone in the ancient parlor. In the air hung a redolence of leather bookbindings, waxed wood, old fabric, and also a faint mustiness of disuse. Efraim went to look out one of the tall windows, each protected by an iron shutter. The time was green rowan; the light lay wan across the landscape.

He turned away and gingerly began to explore the chambers of the Kaiark. The parlor was furnished with massive pieces, well-worn and not uncomfortable, if somewhat stately and ponderous. At one end of the room cases ten feet tall displayed books of every description. Efraim wondered what had been Jochaim's special virtuositities. For that matter, what had been his own?

In a sideboard he found various flasks of liquor, for the Kaiark's private ingestion. A rack displayed a dozen swords, evidently weapons of fame and glory.

A portal nine feet tall and three feet wide opened into an octagonal sitting room. A segmented glass dome high above, flooded the chamber with light. A green rug covered the floor; the wall

panels were painted to represent views over Scharrode from several high vantages: the work, no doubt, of some long-dead kaiark who had professed the rendering of painted landscapes. A spiral stairs led aloft to a balcony, which led to an exterior promenade. Across the sitting room a short hall led into the Kaiark's wardrobe. Uniforms and formal dress hung in closets; chests contained shirts and underlinen; on shelves were ranged dozens of boots, shoes, sandals, slippers: all glossy with polish, brushed and burnished. Kaiark Jochaim had been a punctilious man. The personal belongings, the garments and uniforms communicated nothing. Efraim felt uneasy and resentful; why had not these garments long ago been discarded?

A tall door opened on the Kaiark's bed-chamber: a relatively small room plainly furnished; the bed was little more than a cot, with a hard thin mattress. Efraim saw scope for change here; he had no present taste for asceticism. A short hall opened first upon a bathroom and watercloset, then upon a small chamber furnished with a table and chair: the Kaiark's refectory. Even as Efraim examined the room a lift rumbled up a dumb-waiter from the cellar kitchens, bringing a tureen of soup, a loaf of bread, a plate of leeks in oil, a quantity of black-brown cheese and a tankard of beer. The service, as Efraim would learn, was automatic; every

hour the collation would be renewed, and the Kaiark never need suffer the embarrassment of calling for food.

Efraim discovered himself to be hungry and ate with good appetite. Returning into the hall, he noted that it continued to a flight of dark winding stairs. A noise from the bedroom attracted his attention. He returned to find a pair of valets removing the garments of the dead Kaiark and arranging in their stead a wardrobe conspicuously less ample; presumably the clothes he had left in his old quarters.

"I go now to bathe," Efraim told one of the valets. "Lay out something suitable for me to wear."

"With haste, Force!"

"Also, remove this bed, and bring in something larger and more comfortable."

"Immediately, Force!"

Half an hour later Efraim inspected himself in the mirror. He wore a gray coat over a white shirt, black breeches, black stockings and black velvet shoes: garments suitable for informal occasions within the castle. The clothes hung loosely on his body; he had lost weight since the episode at Port Mar.

The stairs at the back of the hall had not yet been explored. He climbed twenty feet to a landing, where he opened a door and looked out into a hall.

He stepped through. The door seemed to be a section of the

paneling, invisible when closed. As he stood examining the door and speculating upon its purpose, the Lissolet Sthelany emerged from a chamber at the end of the hall. At the sight of Efraim, she hesitated, then approached slowly, her face averted. The green rays of Cirse, shining from the window at the end of the hall, backlighted her figure; Efraim wondered how he had ever considered the gauze gowns drab. He watched her as she approached, and it seemed that her cheeks became suffused with a faint flush. Modesty? Annoyance? Excitement? Her expression gave no indication as to her feelings.

Efraim stood watching as she drew nearer. Evidently she intended to continue past, without acknowledging his presence. He leaned forward, half of a mind to put his arm around her waist. Sensing his intent, she stopped short and turned him an alarmed glance. No question as to her beauty, thought Efraim; she was enchanting, perhaps the more so for the peculiar Rhune predispositions.

She spoke in a light colorless voice: "Why do you bolt so precipitously from the mirk-hole? Do you intend to startle me?"

"'Mirk-hole?'" Efraim looked blankly over his shoulder at the passage. "Yes, of course. I had not considered . . ." Meeting her wondering gaze he stopped short. "No matter. Come down to the Grand Chamber, if you will. I

would like to talk with you." He held open the door but Sthelany recoiled in amazement.

"Through the mirk-way?" She stared from Efraim to the passage, then gave a cool trill of laughter. "Do you care so little for my dignity?"

"Of course not," Efraim declared hastily. "I am absent-minded of late. Let us go by the ordinary route."

"At your convenience, Force." She waited.

Efraim, recalling nothing of the castle's internal plan, reflected a moment, then set off down the corridor in the direction which seemed most logically to lead to the Kaiark's chambers.

Sthelany's cool voice came from behind him. "Does Your Awesome Presence first intend to inspect the tapestry collection?"

Efraim halted and reversed his direction. He walked past the Lissolet without comment and continued to a bend in the hall, which gave upon a foyer. Before him wide stone stairs flanked by balustrades and archaic lamps of wrought iron led down to the main floor. Efraim descended, with the Lissolet coming demurely behind him. With only a second or two of hesitation he headed for the Kaiark's chambers.

He opened the tall doors with the gorgon's heads without difficulty, and ushered Sthelany into the trophy room. He closed the door and pulled a chair away from the table for her use. Giving him

her now familiar glance of sardonic perplexity she asked: "Why do you do that?"

"So that you may sit, and hopefully relax, and so that we may talk at our ease."

"But I may not sit in your presence, under the eyes of your ancestors!" She spoke in a mild and reasonable voice. "Do you wish me to suffer a ghost-blight?"

"Naturally not. Let us go into the parlor, where the portraits will not trouble you."

"Again, this is most unconventional."

Efraim lost patience. "If you don't care to talk with me, you certainly have my permission to go."

Sthelany leaned gracefully back against the table. "If you order me to talk, I must obey."

"Naturally I will not give such an order."

"What do you wish to talk about?"

"I don't really know. Truth to tell, I am puzzled. I have undergone a hundred strange experiences; I have seen thousands of new faces; I have visited the Con-natic's palace on Numenes . . . Now that I have returned, the customs of Scharrode seem strange."

Sthelany considered the matter. "For a fact you seem a different person. The old Efraim was rigorously correct."

"I wonder . . . I wonder . . ." mused Efraim. He looked up to find Sthelany watching him intent-

ly. "So you notice a difference in me?"

"Of course. If I did not know you so well I would think you a different man—especially in view of your peculiar absent-mindedness."

After a moment Efraim said, "I confess to confusion. Remember, I did not realize I was Kaiark until yesterday. And arriving here, I discover an atmosphere of resentment, which is not at all pleasant."

Sthelany showed surprise at Efraim's ingenuousness. "What would you expect? Singhalissa may no longer call herself Kraike; she lacks all legitimate place here at Benbuphar Strang. No less do I and Destian; we all must make plans for dreary old Disbague. We live here at your sufferance. It is a sad turn of events for us."

"I am not anxious that you leave, unless you wish to go."

Sthelany gave an indifferent shrug. "My feelings are of interest only to myself."

"Incorrect. I am interested in your feelings."

Again Sthelany shrugged. "Naturally I prefer Scharrode to Disbague."

"I see. Tell me, what is your recollection of events in Port Mar during those hours before I disappeared?"

Sthelany grimaced. "They were neither edifying nor entertaining. As you will recall, we stayed at the hotel, which was quite decent and proper. You, Destian, Maerio

and I decided to walk through the town to a place called the Fairy Gardens, where we were to watch puppets. All warned us against the vulgarity we were sure to encounter. But we considered ourselves indomitably callous and crossed the bridge, some of us not altogether enthusiastically. You asked directions of a typical young man of the place, capricious and hedonistic—in fact, I believe him to be the same person who accompanied you here. He led us to the Fairy Gardens, but the puppets were gone. Your friend, Lorca, or Lortha, whatever his name, insisted on pouring a bottle of wine, so that we should guzzle and gurgle and swell out our intestinal tracts in full view of all. Forgive my language; I can only report the truth. Your acquaintance showed no shame, and ridiculed matters of which he knew nothing. While you conversed, quite enthusiastically, as I recall, with the Lissolet Maerio, this Lorca became remarkably familiar with me, and indeed made some utterly witless proposals. Destian and I left the Fairy Gardens. Maerio, however, remained with you. She is really much too tolerant. We returned to the hotel, where the Kaiark Rianlle became quite perturbed. He sent Destian to escort Maerio back to the hotel, which he did, leaving you in the company of your friend.”

“And shortly after,” said Efraim, “I was drugged and sent off across space!”

“I should ask your friend what he knows of the matter.”

“Bah,” said Efraim shortly. “Why would he play me such a trick? Somewhere I have gained an enemy, but I cannot suspect Lorcas.”

“You have gained many enemies,” said Sthelany in her soft sweet voice. “There are Gosso of Gorgetto and Sansevery of Torre, both of whom owe you blood, and both expect your reprisals. The Kraike Singhalissa and the Kang Destian are much disadvantaged by your presence. The Lissolet Maerio suffered from your ebullience at Port Mar; neither she nor the Kaiark Rianlle will readily forgive you. As for the Lissolet Sthelany—” she paused and looked sidelong at Efraim; in someone else he might have suspected coquetry—“I reserve my thoughts for myself alone. But I wonder if I can any longer contemplate trisme with you.”

“I hardly know what to say,” Efraim muttered.

Sthelany’s eyes glowed. “You seem distraught and not at all concerned. Of course, you have dismissed the compact as trivial, or even forgotten to.”

Efraim made a lame gesture. “I have become absent-minded . . .”

Sthelany’s voice trembled. “For reasons beyond my imagination, you seek to wound me.”

“No, no! So much has happened; I am truly confused!”

Sthelany inspected him with skeptically raised eyebrows. “Do

you remember anything whatever?"

Efraim rose to his feet and started into the parlor, then imagining Sthelany's emotion should he offer her a cordial, returned slowly to the table.

Sthelany watched his every move. "Why have you returned to Scharrode?"

Efraim laughed hollowly. "Where else could I rule a realm and command the obedience of a person as beautiful as yourself?"

Sthelany abruptly stood back, her face pale save for spots of color in her cheeks. She turned to leave the trophy room.

"Wait!" Efraim stepped forward, but the Lissolet shrank back with a slack jaw, suddenly helpless and frightened. Efraim said: "If you were of a mind to trisme, you must have thought well of me."

Sthelany regained her composure. "This does not necessarily follow; and now I must leave."

Swiftly she departed the chamber. Like a wraith she fled down the corridor, across the Great Hall, in and out of a shaft of green light from the star Cirse, and then she was gone.

Efraim signaled Agnois the First Chamberlain. "Take me to the chambers of the Noble Matho Lorcas."

LORCAS had been lodged on the second level of Minot Tower, in rooms of grotesque and exaggerated amplitude. Hoary beams

supported a ceiling almost invisible by reason of height and dimness; the walls, which were faced with carved stone plaques—again the product of someone's cogence—showed a thickness of five feet where the four tall windows opened to a view of the northern mountains. Lorcas stood with his back to a fireplace ten feet wide and eight feet high, in which a disproportionately small fire was burning. He looked at Efraim with a rueful grin. "I am not at all cramped, and there is much to be learned in the documents yonder." He indicated a massive case thirty feet long and ten feet high. "I discover dissertations, contradictions, and reconsiderations of these same dissertations; and reconsiderations of the contradictions and contradictions of the reconsiderations—all indexed and cross-indexed in the red and blue volumes yonder. I plan to use some of the more discursive reconsiderations for fuel, unless I am furnished a few more sticks for my fire."

The Kraike Singhalissa hoped to awe and quell this flippant Port Mar upstart, so Efraim suspected. "If you are uncomfortable, a change is easily made."

"By no means!" declared Lorcas. "I enjoy the grandeur; I am accumulating memories to last a lifetime. Come join me by this miserable fire. What have you learned?"

"Nothing of consequence. My return has pleased no one."

"And what of your recollections?"

"I am a stranger."

Lorcas ruminated a moment. "It might be wise to visit your old chambers, and examine your belongings."

Efraim shook his head. "I don't care to do so." He dropped into one of the massive chairs and slumped back, legs outthrust across the flags. "The idea oppresses me." He glanced about the walls. "Two or three sets of ears no doubt are listening to our conversation. The walls are shot with mirk-ways." He jumped to his feet. "We had best look into the matter."

They returned to the Kaiark's chambers; Destian's effects had been removed. Efraim touched the button to summon Agnois, who, upon entering, performed a stiff bow, which almost imperceptibly seemed to lack respect. Efraim smiled. "Agnois, I plan many changes at Benbuphar Strang, possibly including new staff. You may let it be known that I am carefully evaluating the conduct of everyone, from top to bottom."

"Very good, Your Force." Agnois, bowing again, displayed considerably more verve.

"In this regard, why have you denied the Noble Lorcas suitable fires? I consider this an incredible failure of hospitality."

Agnois grew pink in the face; his lumpy nose twitched. "I was given to understand, Force—or better to say—in actuality I must

plead guilty of oversight. The matter will be repaired at once."

"A moment, I wish to discuss another matter. I presume that you are acquainted with the affairs of the house?"

"Only to the extent which might be considered discreet and proper, Your Force."

"Very well. As you may know I have been victimized in a most mysterious manner, and I intend to get to the bottom of the business. May I, or may I not, rely upon you for total cooperation?"

Agnois hesitated only an instant, then seemed to heave a doleful sigh. "I am at your service, Force, as ever."

"Very good. Now, let me ask you, is anyone overhearing our present conversation?"

"Not to my knowledge, Force." He went on reluctantly: "I suppose that such a possibility might be said to exist."

"Kaiark Jochaim kept an exact chart of the castle, with all its passages and mirk-holes." Efraim spoke at sheer hazard, on the assumption that among so many records and so much careful lore, a detailed chart of the castle's mirk-ways must inevitably be included. "Bring this article to the table; I wish to examine it."

"Very well, Force, if you will furnish a key to the Privy Case."

"Certainly. Where is Kaiark Jochaim's key?"

Agnois blinked. "Perhaps it bides with the Kraike."

"Where might I find the Kraike

at this moment?"

"She refreshes herself* in her chambers."

Efraim made an impatient gesture. "Take me there. I wish a word or two with her."

"Force, do you order me to precede you?"

"Yes, lead the way."

Agnois bowed. He swung smartly around, conducted Efraim out into the Great Hall, up the stairs, along a corridor into the Jaher Tower, and halted before a tall door studded with garnets. At Efraim's signal he thrust the central garnet and the door swung wide. Agnois stood aside, and Efraim marched into the foyer of the Kraike's private chambers. A maid appeared, and performed a quick supple curtsy. "Your orders, Force?"

"I wish an immediate word with Her Presence."

The maid hesitated, then taking fright at Efraim's expression disappeared the way she had come. A minute passed, two minutes, Efraim pushed through the door despite a muffled exclamation from Agnois.

He stood in a long sitting room hung with red and green tapestry, furnished with gilt wood settees and tables. Through an opening to the side he sensed movement; he

*The dialect of the Rhunes is rife with delicate ambiguities. The term 'to refresh oneself' is susceptible to several interpretations. In this case it may be supposed that the Kraike indulges herself in a nap.

went on swift strides to the portal and so discovered the Kraike Singhalissa at a small cabinet built into the wall, into which at the sight of Efraim she thrust a small object and slammed the door shut. Swinging about she faced Efraim, eyes glowing in fury. "Your Force has forgotten the niceties of conduct."

"All this to the side," said Efraim, "I desire that you open the cabinet."

Singhalissa's face became hard and gaunt. "The cabinet contains only personal treasures."

Efraim turned to Agnois. "Bring an axe, at once."

Agnois bowed. Singhalissa made an inarticulate sound. Turning to the wall she tapped a concealed button. The door to the cabinet opened. Efraim spoke to Agnois. "Bring what you find to the table."

Agnois gingerly brought forth the contents of the cabinet: several leather portfolios and on top an ornate key of iron and silver, which Efraim took up. "What is this?"

"The key to the Privy Case."

"And this other matter?"

"These are my private papers," declared Singhalissa in a voice of metal. "My contracts of trisme, the birth documents of the Kang and the Lissolet."

Efraim glanced through the portfolios. The first showed an intricate architectural plan. He glanced at Singhalissa who stared back coldly. Efraim signaled to

Agnois. "Look through these documents; return to Her Presence the effect she describes. All others, set aside."

Singhalissa settled herself into a chair and sat stiffly. Agnois leaned his heavy back over the table, peering diffidently into the documents. He finished and pushed one group of papers aside. "These concern the personal affairs of the Kraike. The others more properly belong in the Privy Case."

"Bring them along." With the coldest of nods to Singhalissa, Efraim departed the chamber.

He found Matho Lorcas where he had left him, lounging in a massive leather-backed chair, examining a history of the wars between Scharrode and that realm known as Slaunt, fifty miles south. Lorcas put aside the volume and rose to his feet. "What did you learn?"

"About what I expected. The Kraike has no intention of accepting defeat—not quite so easily." Efraim went to the Privy Case, applied the key and threw wide the heavy doors. For a moment he regarded the contents: sheaves of documents, tallies, certificates, handwritten chronicles. Efraim turned away. "One time or another I must examine these. But for now—" he looked across the room to where Agnois stood, stiff and silent as a piece of furniture. "Agnois."

"Yes, Your Force."

"If you feel that you can serve me with single-minded loyalty,

you may continue in your present post. If not, you may resign at this moment, without prejudice."

Agnois spoke in a soft voice: "I served Kaiark Jochaim many years; he discovered no fault with me. I will continue to serve the rightful Kaiark."

"Very good. Find suitable materials and prepare a sketch of Benbuphar Strang, indicating the chambers used by the various members of the household."

"At once, Force."

Efraim went to the massive central table, seated himself, and began to examine the documents he had taken from Singhalissa. He found what appeared to be a ceremonial protocol, certifying the lineage of the House of Benbuphar, beginning in ancient times and terminating with his own name. In crabbed Old Rhune typescript, Kaiark Jochaim acknowledged Efraim, son of the Kraike Alferica, from Cloudscape Castle* as his successor. A second portfolio contained correspondence between Kaiark Jochaim and Kaiark Rianlle of Eccord. The most recent file dealt with Rianlle's proposal that Jochaim cede a tract of land known as Dwan Jar, the Whispering Ridge, to Eccord, in consideration of which Rianlle would offer the Lissolet Maerio in trisme to the Kang Efraim.

*Rhune lineage is reckoned through the mother owing to the unregulated circumstances of procreation, although in many cases father and son are mutually aware of their relationship.

Jochaim politely refused to consider the proposal, stating that trisme between Efraim and Sthelany was under consideration; Dwan Jar could never be relinquished for reasons of which the Kaiark Rianlle was well aware.

Efraim spoke across the table to Agnois. "Why does Rianlle want the Dwan Jar?"

Agnois looked up wonderingly. "For the same reason as always, Force: he would build his mountain eyrie on Point Sasheen, where the way is convenient to and from Belrod Strang. The Kaiark Jochaim, you will remember, refused to indulge the Kaiark Rianlle in his urgent caprice, citing an ancient compact with the Fwai-chi."

"The Fwai-chi? Why should the matter concern them?"

"The Whispering Ridge harbors one of their sanctuaries*, Force." Agnois spoke tonelessly, as if he had decided never again to display surprise at Efraim's vagueness.

"Yes, of course." Efraim opened the third folder and discovered a set of architectural sketches depicting various aspects of Benbuphar Strang. He noticed Agnois averting his gaze in conspicuous disinterest. Here, thought Efraim, were the secret ways of the castle.

The drawings were elaborate and not readily comprehensible.

*Inexact translation. More accurately: place of spiritual regeneration, stage of a pilgrimage, phase of the Life-road.

The Kraike might or might not have made copies of this document. At the very least she had pored over the plans in grim fascination; she undoubtedly knew the secret ways as well as she knew the open corridors.

"That will be all for the moment," Efraim told Agnois. "Under no circumstances discuss our affairs with anyone! If you are questioned, declare that the Kaiark has explicitly forbidden discussion, hints, or intimations of any sort!"

"As you command, Force." Agnois raised his faded blue eyes to the ceiling. "Allow me, Force, if you will, a personal remark. Since the disfunction of the Kaiark Jochaim, affairs at Benbuphar Strang have not gone altogether well, although the Kraike Singhalissa is of course a positive force." He hesitated, then spoke as if the words were forced from his throat by an irresistible inner pressure. "Your return naturally interferes with the plans of the Kaiark Rianlle, and his amicability cannot be taken for granted."

Efraim attempted to seem puzzled and sagacious at the same time. "I have done nothing to antagonize Rianlle—nothing purposeful certainly."

"Perhaps not, but 'purpose' means nothing if Rianlle discovers himself to be thwarted. Effectively, you have annulled the trisme between the Kang Destian and the Lissolet Maerio, and Rianlle will no longer derive profit from a

trisme between himself and the Kraike Singhalissa."

"He values the Dwan Jar that highly?"

"Evidently so, Force."

Efraim hardly troubled to dissemble his ignorance. "Might he then attack by force?"

"Nothing can be considered impossible."

Efraim made a sign of dismissal; Agnois bowed and departed.

ISP BECAME UMBER. Efraim and Lorcás traced, retraced, simplified, coded and rendered comprehensible the plans to Benbuphar Strang. The passage leading up from the back of the refectory seemed no more than a simple short-cut to the second floor of Jaher Tower. The true mirk-ways radiated from a chamber to the side of the Grand Parlor; passages threaded every wall of the castle, intersecting, opening into nodes, ascending, descending, each coded with horizontal stripes of color, each overlooking chambers, corridors and halls, through an assortment of peepholes, periscopes, gratings and image-amplifiers.

From the chambers of the former Kang Efraim and the current Kang Destian radiated less extensive passages, which could be entered by secret means from the Kaiark's mirk-ways. With a gloomy shiver, Efraim pictured himself in his grotesque man-mask purposefully striding these secret corridors, and he wondered into

whose chambers he had thrust wide the door. He pictured the face of the Lissolet Sthelany: pale and taut, her eyes blazing, her mouth half-parted in an emotion she herself would not know how to interpret . . . He returned his attention to the red portfolio, and for the tenth time inspected the index which accompanied it, where the locks and springs controlling each exit were described in detail, together with the alarms intended to thwart illicit passage along the Kaiark's mirk-ways. Exit from the terminal chamber—the so-called 'Sacarlatto'—was barred by an iron door, thus protecting the Kaiark from intrusion, and other such doors blocked the passages at strategic nodes.

Efraim and Lorcás, having achieved at least a superficial acquaintance with the maze, rose to their feet and considered the wall of the Grand Parlor. Silence was heavy in the chamber.

"I wonder," mused Lorcás, "I wonder . . . Might someone intend us unpleasantness? A pitfall, or a poison web? Perhaps I am oppressed by the atmosphere; Rhunes, after all, are not allowed to murder—except by mirk."

Efraim made an impatient gesture; Lorcás had accurately verbalized his own mood. He went to the wall, touched a succession of bosses. A panel slid aside; they climbed a flight of stone steps and entered the Sacarlatto. They walked upon a dark crimson carpet, under a chandelier of twenty

scintillas. Upon each panel of the black- and red-enameled wainscoting hung a carved marble representation of a man-mask in low relief, so that the object lay near-flat against the panel. Each mask depicted a different distortion; each bore a legend in cryptograph symbols. At six stations, mirrors and screens provided views across the Grand Parlor. Lorcas spoke in a hushed voice, which was further attenuated by a quality of the chamber. "Do you smell anything?"

"The carpet. Dust."

"I have a most sensitive nose. I detect a fragrance, an herbal essence."

Standing stiff and white-faced in the gloom, the two men seemed a pair of archaic mannequins.

Lorcas spoke again. "The same essence hangs in the air after Singhalissa has passed."

"You believe then that she was here?"

"Very recently—watching us and listening as we worked. Notice, the iron door is ajar."

"We will close it; and now I will sleep. Later we will lock off the other doors and there will be no more prowling and spying."

"Leave this in my hands! I am fascinated by such matters and I am not at all tired."

"As you like. Remember, the Kraike may have set out alarms of her own."

"I will be careful."

IN THE KAIARK'S sleeping chamber, Efraim awoke and lay in the dimness.

On the mantelpiece a clock showed the mode to be aud, with Furad and Maddar about to set and abandon the sky to chill isp. A second dial reported Port Mar Local Time, and Efraim saw that he had slept seven hours—rather longer than he had intended.

He looked up toward the high ceiling, contemplating the condition in which he found himself. His advantages were easily enumerated. He ruled a beautiful mountain realm from a castle of archaic glamour. He had at least partially thwarted his enemy, or enemies; at this moment he, or she, or they, would be brooding long slow thoughts. Benbuphar Strang harbored hostility: no question as to this. He could expel his antagonists, but to what purpose? These persons were at hand when his memory was smothered . . . The thought caused Efraim to shiver with rage and raise up from his couch.

He bathed and took a dismal breakfast of cold meat, bread and fruit in the refectory. Had he not known the quality of Rhune custom he might have regarded the food as a purposeful affront . . . He speculated as to the advisability of innovation: why should the Rhunes conduct themselves with such exaggerated daintiness when trillions of other folk feasted in

public; with never a concern for their alimentary processes? His own single example would only arouse revulsion and censure; he must think further on the matter.

On the racks and shelves of his dressing room he discovered what he took to be his wardrobe of six months before—a somewhat scanty wardrobe, he reflected. He pulled out a mustard-colored tunic with black frogging and dark red lining, and looked it over: a jaunty garment which no doubt on some informal occasion had set off young Kang Efraim to advantage.

Efraim made a soft sound and examined the other garments. He tried to remember the Kaiark Jochaim's wardrobe, at which he had barely glanced, and could only summon an impression of understated elegance, kaiarkal restraint.

Efraim went thoughtfully into the Grand Parlor and summoned Agnois, who seemed uneasy. He shifted his pale blue gaze aside, and as he bowed the fingers of his big white hands kneaded and twisted.

Before Efraim could speak, Agnois said: "Your Force, the Eiodarks of Scharrode wish an audience, as soon as convenient. They will meet you in two hours if that suits Your Force."

"The audience can wait," growled Efraim. "Come along with me." He led Agnois to the dressing room, where he paused and turned a cold stare upon Agnois, causing the chamberlain to

blink. "As you know, I have been away from Scharrode a matter of six months."

"Yes, Force."

"I have had many experiences, including an accident which has unfortunately obscured portions of my memory. I tell you this in absolute confidence."

"I will naturally respect this confidence, Your Force," stammered Agnois.

"I have forgotten many small niceties of Rhune custom, and I must rely upon your assistance. For instance, these garments: can this be the whole of my former wardrobe?"

Agnois licked his lips. "No, Your Force. The Kraike made a selection of certain garments; these were then brought here."

"These of course are garments I wore as Kang?"

"Yes, Force."

"They seem somewhat jaunty and extravagant in cut. Do you consider them suitable for a person of my present status?"

Agnois pulled at his pale pendulous nose. "Not altogether, Your Force."

"If I wore these before the eiodarks they would consider me frivolous and irresponsible: a callow young fool, in fact."

"I would suspect as much."

"What, precisely, were Singhalissa's instructions?"

"She ordered me to transfer these garments; she further suggested that any interference in Your Force's preferences might be

considered insolence, both by Your Force, and by the Noble Singhalissa herself."

"She told you, in effect to help me make a fool of myself. Then she summoned the eiodarks to an audience."

Agnois spoke hurriedly: "This is accurate, Force, but—"

Efraim cut him short. "Postpone the audience with the eiodarks. Explain that I must study the events of the last six months. Then remove these garments. Instruct the tailors to prepare me a suitable wardrobe. In the meantime bring here whatever can be salvaged from my old wardrobe."

"Yes, Force."

"Further, inform the staff that the Noble Singhalissa will no longer exert authority. I am bored with these petty intrigues. She is to be known not as the 'Kraike' but as the Wirwove of Disbague."

"Yes, Your Force."

"Finally, Agnois, I am astounded that you failed to notify me of Singhalissa's intentions."

Agnois cried out in frustration: "Force, I intended to obey the Noble Singhalissa's instructions to the letter, but nonetheless, by one means or another, I planned to protect Your Force's dignity. Indeed, you divined the ploy before I had opportunity to alter the situation!"

Efraim gave a curt nod. "Lay out garments at least temporarily appropriate."

EFRAIM DRESSED and went out into the Grand Parlor, half expecting to find Matho Lorcas awaiting him. The room was empty. Efraim stood irresolute a moment, then turned as Agnois entered the chamber. Efraim seated himself in a chair.

"Tell me how the Kaiark Jochaim died."

"Nothing, Force, is surely known. Semaphores warned of mirk-men riding down over the Tassenberg from Gorgetto. The Kaiark sent two troops to attack their flank and led a third force to punish the fore-riders. The mirk-men raced for Suban Forest, then retreated up the defiles toward Horsuke. Suddenly the slopes swarmed with Gorget boremen—the Schardes had been lured into an ambush. Jochaim ordered retreat, and the Scharde warriors fought their way back down the gorge. Somewhere along the way Jochaim took a bolt in his back, and died."

"In the back? Had Jochaim taken flight? This is hard to believe!"

"It is my understanding that he had stationed himself on a knoll where he commanded the disposition of his forces. Evidently a mirk-man had slipped around through the rocks and discharged his bore from the rear."

"Who was he? What was his rank?"

"He was never killed, nor captured, Force. Indeed he was never seen. The Kang Destian as-

sumed command of the troops and brought them safely back into Scharrode; and the folk of both Scharrode and Gorgetto expect that an awful retaliation must take place. Gorgetto is said to be an armed camp."

Efraim, suddenly stifled by his ignorance, pounded his fists upon the arms of his chair. "I feel like the fool in a game of blind-man's-buff. I must inform myself; I must learn more of the realm."

"This, Force, may be accomplished without delay; you need merely consult the archives, or if you prefer, the Kaiarkal Pandects along the wall yonder: the volumes in the green and red bindings." Agnois spoke eagerly, relieved that Efraim should be distracted from the episode of the wardrobe.

FOR THREE HOURS Efraim explored the history of Scharrode. Between Gorgetto and Scharrode had existed centuries of strife. Each had dealt the other cruel blows. Eccord had been sometimes ally, sometimes foe, but recently had gained greatly in power and now outmatched Scharrode. Disbague occupied a small shadowed valley high in the Gartfang Rakes, and was considered of small consequence, though the Disbs were credited with a dark deviousness, and many of the women were witches.

Efraim reviewed the noble lineages of Scharrode, and learned something of the trismes which

united them with other realms. He read of himself; of his participation in arrays, exercises, and campaigns; he learned that he was considered bold, persistent and somewhat assertive; that in pressing for innovation he had often been at odds with Jochaim, who insisted upon tradition.

He read of his mother, the Kraike Alferica, who had drowned in a boating accident on Lake Zule during a visit to Eccord. A list of those present at the obsequies included the then Lissolet Singhalissa of Urrue Strang in Disbague. Very shortly after Jochaim contracted a new trisme and Singhalissa came to live at Benbuphar Strang, along with her children Destian and Sthelany, both conceived out of trisme, a circumstance neither unusual nor consequential.

Bloated with facts, Efraim put aside the Pandects and rising to his feet he stretched and slowly paced the Grand Parlor. At a sound he looked up, expecting Matho Lorcass, but found only Agnois. Efraim continued his deliberations. He must reach a decision in connection with the Noble Singhalissa. She had attempted to conceal a number of important documents, then had tried to embarrass and demean him. If he simply adopted a manner of lofty disdain, she would certainly attempt new intrigues. Nonetheless—because of the revulsion which Singhalissa aroused in him—he felt an almost uncon-

querable reluctance toward dealing harshly with her; such acts created an intimacy of their own, like that hateful empathy between the torturer and his victim. Still, he must make some sort of response, lest she consider him futile and indecisive.

"Agnois, I have come to a decision. The Noble Singhalissa is to be transferred from her present suite into that now occupied by my friend Matho Lorcas. Bring the Noble Lorcas to more congenial quarters in the Jaher Tower. Attend to this at once; I want no delay."

"Your orders shall be effectuated! May I venture a comment?"

"Certainly."

"Why not send her back to Disbague? At Urrue Strang she would seem to be at a safe distance."

"The suggestion is sensible. However, she might not remain at Disbague, but set about organizing troubles from all directions. Here, at least, she is under my eye. Again, I do not know that person who dealt me harm six months ago. Why expel Singhalissa until I learn the truth? Also—" Efraim hesitated. If Singhalissa departed, Sthelany almost certainly would depart too, but he did not care to explain as much to Agnois.

He walked up and down the parlor wondering how much Agnois knew of mirk-deeds about the castle, and how much Agnois

could tell him in regard to Sthelany: what was her conduct during mirk? Did she bolt her door and bar her windows, as fearful maidens were wont to do? Where was Sthelany now? In fact: "Where is Matho Lorcas?"

"He accompanies the Lissolet Sthelany; they walk in the Garden of Bitter Odors."

Efraim grunted and continued his pacing. As he might have expected. He gave Agnois a brusque gesture. "See that the Noble Singhalissa is moved to her new quarters at once. You need supply no explanations; your orders are simple and explicit. No, wait! You may say that I am angry with you for bringing useless old clothes to my wardrobe."

"Very well, Force." Agnois hurried from the chamber. After a moment Efraim followed. Passing through the silent reception hall, he went out upon the terrace. Before him spread the far landscape, placid in the halcyon light of umber. Matho Lorcas came running up the steps.

"So ho!" cried Lorcas, in what Efraim considered unnatural cheer, or perhaps he was nervously gay. "I wondered how long you intended to sleep."

"I've been awake for hours. What have you been doing?"

"A great deal. I explored passages out of the Sacarlatto. For your information the passages leading to the chambers of both the Noble Singhalissa and the Lissolet Sthelany are obstructed—

sealed off with walls of masonry. When mirk arrives, you must turn your attention elsewhere."

"Singhalissa has been busy."

"She overrates the magnetism of her precious body," said Lorcás. "Sthelany is a different matter."

"It appears that you must seduce her by more conventional means," said Efraim in a morose voice.

"Ha hah! I would expect more success chiseling through the masonry. Still, either method is a challenge, and I am stimulated by challenges. What a triumph for the liberal philosophy should I succeed!"

"True. If you want to see how the land lays, why not invite her to take lunch with you?"

"Oh, I know how the land lays. I learned the entire map six months ago in Port Mar. In a certain sense we're old friends."

Agnois stepped forth from the Reception Hall, his lined gray face limp and loose under the velvet tricorne emblematic of his office. He saluted Efraim. "The Noble Singhalissa states that she is most distressed by your orders, and that she finds them incomprehensible."

"You offered her my remark in regard to the wardrobe?"

"I did, Force, and she professed bewilderment. She urges that you condescend to receive her at an inhalation*, in order to discuss the matter."

"Certainly," said Efraim. "In—

let us say—two hours, when umber becomes green rowan, if yonder phase-dial is faithful."

"Two hours, Force? She used an urgent form of speech, and evidently wishes the benefit of your wisdom at once."

"I am suspicious of Singhalissa's immediacies," said Efraim. "Two hours will enable you to provide exactly proper garments for me, and for the Noble Matho Lorcás. Additionally, I have certain arrangements to make."

Agnois departed, puzzled and resentful. For the tenth time Efraim wondered as to the advisability of replacing him. With his special knowledge, Agnois was almost indispensable, but Agnois also was given to vacillation and at the mercy of the last personality with whom he had come into contact.

Efraim said to Lorcás: "You would like to attend an inhalation, I take it?"

"Of course. It will be an unforgettable experience—one among many, if I may say so."

"Then meet me in the Grand Parlor in two hours. Your quarters have been changed to the Jaher Tower, incidentally; I am transfer-

*The word *sherdas*, an inexact translation. Those attending a *sherdas* are seated around a table. From properly disposed orifices a succession of aromatic odors and perfumes is released. To praise the fumes too highly, or to inhale too deeply is considered low behavior and leaves the guilty person open to suspicions of gourmandizing.

ring Singhalissa to those you now occupy." Efraim grinned. "I hope to teach her not to play tricks on the Kaiark."

"I doubt if you'll succeed," said Lorcas. "She knows tricks you've never thought of. If I were you I'd look in my bed for snakes before jumping under the covers."

"Yes," said Efraim. "No doubt you are right." He entered the castle, crossed the reception hall, passed along the Corridor of Ancestors, but instead of entering the Trophy Room, turned aside into a corridor paved with brown and white tiles, and so came to a chamber which served as office, bursary and domestic headquarters. A bench by the side wall supported an archaic communicator.

Efraim closed and locked the door. He addressed himself to the communicator code-book, then pressed a set of discolored old buttons. The screen glowed with pale light, showing sudden jagged disks of carmine red as the summons sounded at the opposite end of the connection.

Three or four minutes passed. Efraim sat patiently. To expect a crisp response would have been unrealistic.

The screen glowed green, powdered into fugitive dots which reformed to display the visage of a pale old man with locks of lank white hair dangling past his ears. He peered at Efraim with a half-challenging, half-myopic glare and spoke in a rattling croak. "Who

calls Gorgance Strang, and for what purpose?"

"I am Efraim, Kaiark of Scharrode. I wish to speak with your master the Kaiark."

"I will announce that Your Force awaits him."

Another five minutes passed, then upon the screen appeared a massive copper-colored face from which hung a great beak of a nose and a deep pendulum of a chin. "Kaiark Efraim, you have returned to Scharrode. Why do you call me, when no such communication has occurred for a hundred years?"

"I call you, Kaiark Gosso, for knowledge. While I was absent, mirk-men from Gorgetto entered Scharrode. During this raid the Kaiark Jochaim suffered death from a Gorget bolt, which burst open his back."

Gosso's eyes contracted to ice-blue slits. "So much may be fact. What then? We await your onslaught. Send over your mirk-men; we will impale them on ridgeline saplings. Marshal your noblemen, advance upon us with open faces. We will face you rank for rank and slaughter the best of Scharrode."

"I did not call to inquire the state of your emotions, Gosso. I am not interested in rhodomontade."

Gosso's voice became profoundly deep. "Why, then, have you called?"

"I find the circumstances of Kaiark Jochaim's death peculiar.

In the melée of mirk-men and Scharde troops, he commanded from the rear. Did he turn his back to the fight? Unlikely. So then, who among your mirk-men killed the Scharde Kajark?"

"No one has asserted such a triumph," rumbled Gosso. "I made careful inquiry, to no avail." "A provocative situation."

"From your point of view, indeed." Gosso's eyelids relaxed slightly; he moved back in his chair. "Where were you during the raid?"

"I was far away: to Numenes and the Connatic's palace. I have learned many new things, and one of them is this: the raids and onslaughts between Gorgetto and Scharrode amount to mutual catastrophe. I propose a truce."

Gosso's ropy mouth drew back to display his teeth, not a grin, so Efraim presently realized, but a grimace of reflection.

"What you say is true enough," said Gosso at last. "There are few old men either in Gorgetto or Scharrode. Still, everyone must die sooner or later, and if the warriors of Gorgetto are denied the raiding of Scharrode, how will I keep them occupied?"

"I have troubles of my own. No doubt you can find a way."

Gosso cocked his head to the side. "My warriors may protest such an insipid existence. The raids drain their energies, and life is easier for me."

Efraim said shortly: "You can notify those who question your

authority that I am resolved to end the raids. I can offer honorable peace; or I can assemble all my forces and totally destroy Gorgetto. As I study the Pandects I see that this is within my capabilities, if at the cost of many lives. Most of these many lives will be Gorget, inasmuch as we command the heights with our sails. It appears to me that the first choice makes the fewest demands upon everybody."

Gosso gave a sardonic caw of laughter. "So it might appear. But never forget we have rejoiced in the slaughter of Schardes for a thousand years. In Gorgetto a boy does not become a man until he kills his Scharde . . . Still, you seem to be serious and I will consider the matter."

THE SALON of Sherdes and Private Receptions occupied the third level of the squat Arjer Skyrd tower. Instead of the modestly proportioned chamber Efraim had expected, he found a hall seventy feet long and forty feet wide, with a floor of black and white marble blocks. Six tall windows admitted floods of that curious olive-green light characteristic of umber passing into green rowan. Marble pilasters broke the wall into a series of bays, color-washed a pale russet. In each stood a massive urn three feet tall fashioned of black-brown stoneware: the product of a co-gence. The urns contained white sand and plumes of dry grass,

without odor. A table ten feet wide and twenty feet long supported four etiquette screens. At each side of the table a chair had been placed.

Agnois hurried forward. "Your Force has arrived a trifle early; our arrangements, I fear to say, are incomplete."

"I came early intentionally." Efraim inspected the chamber, then the table. He asked in a soft voice: "The Kaiark Jochaim frequented this 'salon'?"

"Indeed, Force, when the company was not numerous."

"Which place was reserved for him?"

"Yonder, Force, is the Kaiark's place." Agnois indicated the far side of the table.

Efraim, now accustomed to the unconscious signals which indicated Agnois' moods, eyed him attentively. "That is the chair used by Kaiark Jochaim? It is precisely like the others; they are identical."

Agnois hesitated. "These are the chairs ordered out by the Noble Singhalissa."

Efraim controlled his voice with an effort. "Did I not instruct you to disregard Singhalissa's orders?"

"I recall something of the sort, Force," said Agnois lamely, "but I tend to obey her by reflex, especially in small matters such as this."

"Do you consider this a small matter?"

Agnois grimaced and licked his lips. "I had not analyzed it along

such lines."

"But the chair is not that chair customarily used by the Kaiark?"

"No, Your Force."

"In fact, it is a chair quite unsuitable to the dignity of a Kaiark—especially under the present conditions."

"I suppose that I must agree with you, Force."

"So again, Agnois, you have at worst conspired, at best cooperated, with Singhalissa in her attempts to make me a buffoon and so diminish my authority."

Agnois uttered a cry of anguish. "By no means, Force! I acted in all innocence!"

"Set the table to rights, instantly!"

Agnois turned a side-look toward Lorcas. "Shall I seat five, Your Force?"

"Leave it at four."

The offending chair was removed; another more massive, inlaid with carnelians and turquoises, was brought in. "Notice, Force," said Agnois effusively, "the small mesh here by your ear, by which the Kaiark can receive messages and advices."

"Very good," said Efraim. "I will expect you to stand in concealment and advise me as to etiquette and custom."

"With pleasure, Your Force!"

Efraim seated himself and placed Lorcas at the end of the table to his right.

Lorcas said reflectively: "These tricks are really rather petty—not

what one might expect of Singhalissa."

"I don't know what to expect from Singhalissa. I imagine that her aim is to demonstrate me a fool as well as an amnesiac, so that the eidarks will eject me in favor of Destian."

"You'd do well to pack her off."

"I suppose so. Still—"

Singhalissa, Sthelany and Destian entered the chamber. Efraim and Lorcas politely rose to their feet. Singhalissa came a few steps forward, then halted, regarding the two remaining chairs with pinched nostrils. She then spared a quick glance for the stately chair which Efraim occupied. "I am somewhat baffled," she said. "I envisioned an informal discussion, in which all opinions might most expeditiously be aired."

Efraim replied in an even voice: "I could not conceive a conference on a basis other than propriety. But I am surprised to see the Squire Destian; from the arrangements I understood that only you and the Noble Sthelany planned to attend our conference. Agnois, be so good as to arrange another place there, to the left of Her Dignity the Wirwove. Sthelany, be so good as to seat yourself in this chair to my left."

Smiling a faint vague smile, Sthelany took her seat. Singhalissa and Destian stood aside with dour faces as Agnois rearranged the table. Efraim watched Sthelany surreptitiously, as always wondering

what went on in her brain. At this moment she seemed indolent, careless, and totally introverted.

Singhalissa and Destian at last were seated; Efraim and Lorcas gravely returned to their own places. Singhalissa made a small movement, but Lorcas gave a peremptory rap on the table with his knuckles, causing Singhalissa and Destian to look at him questioningly. Sthelany was studying Efraim with an interest almost embarrassingly intent.

Efraim spoke. "The present circumstances are strained, and certain of you have been forced to accept an attenuation of prospects. In reference to the events of the last six months, I remind you that I have been the chief victim. Excepting, of course, the Kaiark Jochaim, who was robbed of his life. Nevertheless, the inconveniences I personally have suffered have made me callous of lesser complaints, and it is on this basis that we hold our discussion."

Sthelany's smile became even more vague; Destian's sneer was almost audible. Singhalissa gripped the arms of her chair with long fingers, so tightly that bones shone luminous through the skin. Singhalissa replied: "Needless to say, we all must adapt to changing circumstances; it is sheer futility to do otherwise. I have conferred long and earnestly with the Noble Destian and the Lissolet Sthelany; we all are perplexed by your misfortunes. You have been a victim

of 'unconventional violence', which I understand is not uncommon at Port Mar." Singhalissa's flick of a glance toward Lorcas was almost too swift to be sensed. "You were doubtless waylaid by some off-worlder, for reasons beyond my comprehension."

Efraim grimly shook his head. "This theory commands low probability, especially in view of certain other facts. I was almost certainly beset by a Rhune enemy, for whom our standards of decency have lost all meaning."

Singhalissa's high sweet voice became a trifle strident. "We cannot evaluate undisclosed 'facts', but in any event your enemy is unknown to us. I only wonder if after all there has not been a mistake."

For the first time Lorcas spoke. "To clarify matters once and for all, are you giving His Force to understand that in the first place, none of you have knowledge of the event at Port Mar, and secondly, that none of you have received information regarding this event, and thirdly, that none of you can guess as to whom might be responsible?"

No one answered. Efraim said gently: "The Noble Matho Lorcas is my friend and counsellor; his question is a fair one. What of you, Squire Destian?"

*An act of molestation or violence—a mirk-deed, so to speak—committed during the daylight hours, a depravity unimaginable among persons of dignity.

Destian responded in a surly baritone: "I know nothing."

"Lissolet Sthelany?"

"I know nothing of anything."

"Your Dignity the Wirwove?"

"The affair is incomprehensible."

Through the mesh at the back of Efraim's chair sounded Agnois' hoarse whisper. "It would be politic to ask Singhalissa if she might care to refresh herself and the company with a medley of vapors."

Efraim said: "I naturally accept your explicit assurances. If anyone chances to recall some forgotten fact which may be relevant, I will be grateful to hear it. Perhaps we should now entreat Her Dignity to refresh us with vapors."

Singhalissa leaned stiffly forward and drew out a panel in front of her, displaying knobs, toggles, bulbs and other mechanisms, then drawers to right and left containing hundreds of small vials. Her long fingers worked with intricacy and deftness; vials were lifted; drops of liquid poured into a silver orifice, to be followed by powders and a gout of seething green liquor; then she pushed a button and a pump blew the fumes along tubes under the table and up behind the etiquette screens. Meanwhile, with her left hand, Singhalissa was altering her first vapor so that it might modulate into a second which she was busy preparing with her right hand.

The fumes followed each other like musical tones, and ended, as

with a coda, upon an artfully bitter nose-wrenching whiff.

Agnois' whisper sounded in Efraim's ear. "Call for more; this is etiquette!"

Efraim said: "Your Dignity has only stimulated our expectations; why must you stop now?"

"I am flattered that you honor my efforts," But Singhalissa sat back from the vials.

After a pause Destian spoke, a saturnine half-smile trembling on his lips. "I am curious to learn as to how you intend to punish Gosso and his jackals."

"I will take counsel upon the matter."

Singhalissa, as if impelled by an irresistible creative urge, once more bent over the vials; again she poured and vapors issued from behind the etiquette screens. In Efraim's ear sounded Agnois' husky whisper: "She is discharging raw essences at random, concocting a set of stinks. She understands your distraught condition and hopes to draw forth fulsome compliments."

Efraim leaned back from the etiquette screen. He glanced at Destian who could scarcely control his merriment. Sthelany sat with a wry expression. Efraim said: "Her Dignity the Wirwove suddenly seems to have lost her sure instincts. Some of these vapors are absolutely amazing, even for the entertainment of a group as informal as this. Perhaps Her Dignity attempts a set of new combinations imported from Port

Mar?"

Singhalissa wordlessly desisted from her manipulations. Efraim sat erect in his chair. "The subject we had not yet touched upon was my order to move Your Dignity to Minot Tower. In view of the chairs and the fumes, I will not reconsider my decision. There has been altogether too much interference and meddling. I hope that we have seen the last of it, inasmuch as I would not care to inconvenience Your Dignity to an even greater extent."

"Your Force is most considerate," said Singhalissa, without so much as a quiver in her voice.

Through the tall windows the light had changed, as umber fully gave way to green rowan, with Cirse barely grazing the horizons.

Sthelany said: "Mirk approaches; dark hideous mirk when the gharks and hoos come forth and all the world is dead."

Lorcas asked in a cheerful voice: "What is a 'ghark' and what is a 'hoo'?"

"Evil beings."

"In human form?"

"I know nothing of such things," said Sthelany. "I take refuge behind a door triple-bolted and strong iron shutters at my window. You must ask elsewhere for your information."

Matho Lorcas gave his head a shake of whimsical wonder. "I have traveled far and wide," he said, "and never cease to be amazed by the diversities of Alastor Cluster."

The Lissolet Sthelany half-yawned, then spoke in an easy voice: "Does the Noble Lorcas include the Rhunes among those peoples who excite his amazement?"

Lorcas grinned and leaned forward. Here was the milieu he loved: conversation! Supple sentences, with first and second meanings and overtones beyond, outrageous challenges with cleverly planned slip-points, rebuttals of elegant brevity; deceptions and guiles, patient explanations of the obvious, fleeting allusions to the unthinkable. As a preliminary, the conversationalist must gauge the mood, the intelligence and the verbal facility of the company. To this end a few words of pedantic exposition often proved invaluable. "By an axiom of cultural anthropology, the more isolated a community, the more idiosyncratic become its customs and conventions. This of course is not necessarily disadvantageous.

"On the other hand consider a person such as myself: a rootless wanderer, a cosmopolitan. Such a person tends to flexibility; he adapts himself to his surroundings without qualms or misgivings. His baggage of conventions is simple and natural, the lowest common denominator of his experience. He evinces a kind of universal culture which will serve him almost anywhere across Alastor Cluster, throughout the Gaeen Reach. I make no virtue of this flexibility, except to suggest that it

is more comfortable to travel with than a set of conventions, which, if jostled, work emotional strains upon those who espouse them."

Singhalissa joined the conversation, speaking in a voice as dry as the rustle of dead leaves. "The Noble Lorcas with earnest conviction proposes a view which I fear we Rhunes regard as banal. As he knows, we never travel, except rarely to Port Mar. Even were we disposed to travel, I doubt if we would school ourselves in habits which we find not only vulgar but repellent. This is an informal gathering; I will venture upon an unpleasant topic. The ordinary citizen of the Cluster shows a lack of self-consciousness regarding his bowel which is typically animal. Without shame he displays his victual, salivates, wads it into his orifice, grinds it with his teeth, massages it with his tongue, impels the pulp along his intestinal tract. With only little more modesty he excretes the digested mess, occasionally making jokes as if he were proud of his alimentary facility. Naturally we obey the same biological compulsions, but we are more considerate of our fellows and perform these acts in privacy." As she spoke Singhalissa never abandoned her mordant monotone.

Destian uttered a soft chuckle endorsing her views.

Lorcas however would not be daunted. He nodded sagely. "Everything depends upon the quality of one's conventions. Agreed! But

we must examine this so-called 'quality' for its usefulness. Over-complicated, over-strict conventions limit a person's life-options. They confine his mind and stunt his perceptions. Why, in the name of the Connatic's pet owl, should we even consider a limit to the possibilities of this, our one and single life?"

"You will confuse us all if you talk in ultimates and eschatologies," said Singhalissa with a cold smile. "They are not germane in any case. One may exemplify any point of view, no matter how absurd, by carefully citing an appropriate, or even an artificial, theory. The traveler and cosmopolitan whom you have chosen as your paladin above all else should realize the difference between abstractions and living human beings, between sociological concepts and durable communities. As I listen to you I hear only ingenuousness and didactic theory."

Lorcas compressed his lips. "Perhaps because you are hearing views which contradict your emotions. But I stray from the mark. The 'durable communities' you mention are beside the point. Societies are amazingly tolerant of abuse, even those burdened with dozens of obsolete or unnatural or even baneful conventions."

Singhalissa allowed herself to show open amusement. "I suspect that you take an extreme position. Only children are intolerant of conventions. They are indispensa-

ble to an organized civilization, like discipline to an army, or foundations to a building, or landmarks to a traveler. Without conventions civilization is a handful of water. An army without discipline is a mob. A building without foundations is rubble. A traveler without landmarks is lost."

Lorcas stated that he opposed not all conventions, but only those which he found irksome and pointless.

Singhalissa refused to let him off so easily. "I suspect that you refer to the Rhunes, and here, as a stranger, you are particularly handicapped in your judgments. I find my particular way of life orderly and reasonable, which should certainly satisfy you. Unless, of course, you consider me indiscriminating and stupid?"

Lorcas saw that he had caught a Tartar. He shook his head. "By no means! Quite the contrary. Without hesitation I agree that, at the very least, your outlook upon life is different from that of mine."

Singhalissa had already lost interest in the conversation. She turned to Efraim. "With your permission, Force, I take my leave."

"As you wish, Your Dignity."

Singhalissa stalked from the room in a flutter of gray gauze, followed by Destian, stiff and erect, and then, Sthelany. Behind marched Efraim and Matho Lorcas, somewhat subdued. They found themselves on the arcade

which connected the third level of Arjer Skyrd to the high parlors of the North Tower, then gave upon the upper balcony of the herbarium.

Descending the North Tower staircase, they were arrested by a sudden clanging of gongs; followed by a wild braying of horns in an agitated fanfare.

Singhalissa glanced back over her shoulder; her thin cheeks were compressed into an unmistakable smile.

Chapter 8

EFFRAIM CONTINUED DOWN the staircase to the frenzy of the fanfare produced by six men with convolved bronze sad-horns. Six horns, wondered Efraim? He himself, the returning Kaiark, had only been greeted with four! A slight which he had failed to notice.

The front portals had been flung ajar, and here stood Agnois, wearing a long white cloak crusted over with blue and silver embroidery and a complicated turban-like headdress: garments reserved for the most profoundly serious occasions. Efraim compressed his lips. What to do with the wretched Agnois, who had assisted him during the reception, but who had failed to warn him of whatever now was about to ensue?

The fanfare became a hysteria of yelling horns, to halt abruptly as a man in splendid black gar-

ments, picked out with pink and silver stripes, strode through the portal. Behind him marched four eidarks. All wore headgear of pink and black cloth, wound up on pronged fillets of silver.

Efraim halted a moment on the landing, then descended slowly. Agnois cried out: "His Majestic Force, the Kaiark Rianlle of Ec-cord!"

Rianlle halted, scrutinizing Efraim with pale hazel eyes under dark golden eyebrows. He stood stiffly erect, aware of the splendid spectacle he made: a man in the fullest vigor of his life, not yet middle-aged, square-faced, with curling dark golden hair; a man of pride and passion, perhaps lacking in humor, but certainly not a person to be taken lightly.

Efraim stood waiting until Rianlle advanced another two steps. Efraim said: "Welcome to Benbuphar Strang. I am pleased, if surprised, to see you."

"Thank you." Rianlle turned abruptly away from Efraim and performed a formal bow. Down the stairs came Singhalissa, Destian and Sthelany.

Efraim said: "You are of course well-acquainted with her Dignity the Wirwove, the Squire Destian and the Lissolet Sthelany. This is the Noble Matho Lorcass, of Port Mar."

Rianlle acknowledged the introduction by no more than a cold glance. Matho Lorcass bowed courteously. "At your service, Force."

Efraim stepped aside and signaled to Agnois. "Conduct these noble gentlemen to appropriate chambers where they may refresh themselves, then come to the Grand Parlor."

Agnois presently appeared in the Grand Parlor. "Yes, Your Force?"

"Why did you not notify me that Rianlle was to arrive?"

Agnois spoke in an injured voice: "I did not know myself, until Her Dignity upon leaving the salon ordered me to prepare a reception. I barely had time to accomplish the task."

Efraim said, "I see. He wears his headgear in the castle; is this customary and polite?"

"It is formal usage, Force. The headdress signifies authority and autonomy. In a formal colloquy of equals both parties will dress similarly."

"Bring me suitable garments and headgear, if any are available."

Efraim dressed. "Conduct Rianlle here whenever he is so minded. If his retinue starts to come, explain that I prefer a private discussion with Rianlle."

"As you wish, Force." Agnois hesitated. "I might point out that Eccord is a powerful realm with victorious traditions. Rianlle is a vain man but not stupid. He esteems himself and his prestige at an exalted level."

"Thank you, Agnois. Bring in Rianlle; I will deal with him as carefully as possible."

Half an hour later Agnois ushered Rianlle into the Parlor. Efraim rose to greet him. "Will you sit? These chairs are quite comfortable."

"Thank you." Rianlle settled himself.

"Your visit is of course most welcome," said Efraim. "You will forgive me if I seem disorganized; I have hardly had time to collect my wits."

"You returned at a most opportune moment," observed Rianlle, his hazel eyes wide and luminous. "At least for yourself."

Efraim sat back in his chair and inspected Rianlle a full five seconds. Then he said in a cool unaccented voice: "I did not time my return on this basis; I was unaware that Jochaim had been murdered until my arrival in Port Mar."

"Allow me to offer my personal condolences and those of all Eccord upon this untimely death. Did you use the word 'murder'?"

"The evidence indicates something of the sort."

Rianlle nodded slowly and looked thoughtfully across the room. "I came both to express my sympathy and to consolidate the friendly relations between our realms."

"You may take for granted my desire that they continue."

"Excellent. I assume that you intend a smooth continuity between the policies of Jochaim and your own?"

Efraim began to sense a pres-

sure behind Rianlle's suave remarks. He said cautiously: "In many cases no doubt this will be true. In others, the simple mutability of life and circumstance dictates changes."

"A prudent and flexible point of view! Allow me to offer my commendation! In the relations between Eccord and Scharrode there will be no mutability; I would like to assure that I intend to honor to the letter every commitment made by me to Jochaim; I would like to hear that the converse holds true."

Efraim made an affable gesture. "Let us not talk high policy at this moment. I am not yet in command of all the facts and anything I could now say would be tentative. But since our two realms are so closely knit in amity, what benefits one benefits the other, and you may be assured that I intend to do my best for Scharrode."

Rianlle glanced sharply at Efraim, then stared toward the ceiling. "Agreed; large matters may wait. There is one rather inconsequential issue which we can easily resolve now without prejudice to your program. I refer to that trifle of territory along Whispering Ridge where I wish to build a pavilion for our mutual enjoyment. Jochaim was on the point of signing the parcel over to me when he met his death."

"I wonder if there was any connection between the two events," mused Efraim.

"Of course not! How could

there be?"

"My imagination is over-active. In regard to Whispering Ridge I must admit an aversion toward yielding so much as a square inch of our sacred Scharrode soil; still, I will study the matter."

"Not satisfactory!" Rianlle's voice had taken on an edge, and sang like a vibrating wire. "I am thwarted in my wishes!"

"Is anyone ever continually and completely gratified? Let us talk no more of the subject. Perhaps I can induce the Lissolet to contrive a series of stimulating atmospheres . . ."

AT THE GREAT twenty-sided table in the Formal Reception Chamber, Rianlle sat stiff and glum. Sthelany formulated a series of fumes, somehow suggesting a walk over the hills: soil and sunlit vegetation, water and wet rocks, the perfume of anthion and wood violet, mold, rotten wood and camphor. She worked without Singhalissa's deftness, rather seeming to amuse herself among the vials as a child might play with colored chalks. Sthelany's fingers began to move faster; she had become interested in her contrivances as a musician suddenly perceives meanings in his music which he is forced to explicate. Gone was the hillside, away the forest; the vapors were at first gay, tart and light; gradually they lost character, only to become sweetly melancholy, like heliotrope in a forgotten garden. And

this odor in turn became pervaded with a bitter exudation, then a salt pungency, then a final despairing black reek. Sthelany looked up with a twisted smile and closed the drawers.

Rianlle uttered an ejaculation: "You have performed with enormous artistry; you have shaken us all with cataclysmic visions!"

Efraim looked around the table. Destian sat toying with a silver bracelet; Singhalissa sat stiff and staring; the eiodynamics of Eccord muttered together. Lorcias stared in wonder toward Sthelany. Efraim thought: he is totally fascinated, but he had better make his emotion less overt, or he will be accused of sebalism.

Rianlle turned to Efraim. "When you say 'murder' you use an inglorious word to describe the death of the honored Jochaim. How then will you deal with that dog Grosso?"

Efraim held his face immobile against a surge of annoyance. He had used the word 'murder' perhaps indiscreetly; but need Rianlle blurt out the details of what Efraim had considered a confidential conversation? He felt the sudden interest of both Singhalissa and Destian.

"I have made no precise plans. I plan to end the war with Gorgetto on one basis or another; it is useless and it bleeds us white."

"If I understand you correctly, you intend to prosecute only use-

ful wars?"

"If wars there must be, I intend to fight for only tangible and necessary goals. I do not regard war as entertainment and I shall not hesitate to use unusual tactics."

Rianlle's smile was almost openly contemptuous. "Scharrode is a small realm. Realistically, you are at the mercy of your neighbors, no matter how peculiar your campaigns."

"Your opinions of course carry great weight," said Efraim.

Rianlle went on in a measured voice. "I recall some previous discussion of a trisme, that the fortunes of Scharrode and Eccord might be joined. The subject at this moment is perhaps premature in view of the chaotic circumstances here in Scharrode."

From the corner of his eye Efraim noted a shifting of positions around the table, as tense muscles demanded relief. He met the dark gaze of Sthelany; her face seemed as pensive as ever, and—could it be true?—somehow wistful.

Rianlle once more was speaking, and everyone about the table fixed their gaze upon that unnaturally handsome face. "Nevertheless, all will no doubt sort itself out. Accommodation between our two realms must be achieved. An imbalance now exists, and I refer to the unfulfilled contract in regard to Dwan Jar, the Whispering Ridge. If a trisme will facilitate the hoped-for equilibrium, then I must give the

matter serious consideration.”

Efraim laughed and shook his head. “Trisme is a responsibility I do not care to assume at the moment, especially since Your Force displays such clear misgivings. Indeed, your perceptions are remarkable; you have correctly defined the situation here. Scharrode is a welter of mysteries which must be resolved before we can move onward.”

Rianlle rose to his feet, as did his retinue of eiodarks. “Scharrode hospitality is as always correct, and induces us to prolong our visit, but we must take our leave. I trust that Your Force will make a realistic assessment of past, present and putative future and act to the best interests of us all.”

Efraim and Lorcas went out to the parapets of Deistary Tower and watched as Rianlle and his retinue climbed into the rented* air-car, which a moment later lifted high and flew north.

LORCAS HAD RETIRED to his refectory to take a furtive meal; then he planned to sleep. Efraim remained on the parapets looking off over the valley, which in the light of half-aud presented so entrancing a vista that his heart missed a beat. From this land the

*The Rhune Realms are allowed no air-cars because of their aggressive proclivities. When a Rhune wishes to make a journey he must call into Port Mar and hire a suitable vehicle for the occasions.

substance of his body had been drawn; it was his own, to nurture and love and rule, for all foreseeable time; yet how useless! how forlorn! Scharrode was lost to him; he had broken the crust of tradition. Never again could he be a Rhune, nor could the damage be mended. He would never be a whole man in Scharrode, nor elsewhere; never would he be content.

He studied the landscape with the intensity of a man about to go blind. Light slanting down across Alode the Cliff illuminated a hundred forests; the irradiated foliage seemed to glow with internal light: bitter lime, intense gray-blue given pointillist fire by scarlet seed-pots, dark umber, black-blue, black-green. Surrounding stood the great peaks, each named and known in ancient fable: aloof Shanajra bearded with snow, who, resenting the mockery of the Bird Crag, turned his face to the south to stand forever brooding; the Two Hags Kamr and Dimw, rancorous above Danquill, enchanted and sleeping under a blanket of murre trees; there, Whispering Ridge, coveted by Rianlle, where the Fwai-chi walked to their sacred places among the Lenglin Mountains . . . His land forever, his land never; and what was he to do? In all the realm a single man he could trust: the Port Mar vagabond Matho Lorcas. Gosso might or might not interpret his offer as an admission of weakness; Rianlle's not too sub-

tle threats might or might not be intended seriously. Singhalissa might yet intrigue with sufficient finesse to cause him woe . . . Efraim decided that he must, without further delay, call together the Scharde eiodarks, to assist him with his decisions.

The landscape dimmed, as Osmo dropped behind Alode the Cliff. Furaad hung low in the sky over Shanajra.

A slow step sounded on the marble flags; turning, Efraim saw Sthelany. She hesitated, then came to join him. Together they leaned on the parapets. From the corner of his eye Efraim studied Sthelany's face. What transpired behind that clear pale brow; what prompted that half-wistful half-mocking twist of the lips?

"Mirk is near," said Sthelany. She glanced toward Efraim. "Your Force no doubt has thoroughly reconnoitered the passages which lead here and there about the castle?"

"Only in order to protect myself from the surveillance of your mother."

Sthelany shook her head smilingly. "Is she really interested in your activities?"

"Some female of the household has demonstrated that interest. Could it be you?"

"I have never set foot in a mirk-way."

Efraim took note of the equivocation. "To answer your question precisely, I have indeed explored the mirk-ways, and I am arranging

that they be interrupted by heavy iron doors."

"Then it would seem that Your Force does not intend to exercise the prerogatives of rank?"

Efraim arched his eyebrows at the question. He responded in what he hoped to be dignified tones: "I certainly do not intend to violate the persons of anyone against their will. Additionally, as I'm sure you know, the passage to your chambers is blocked by masonry."

"Indeed! Then I am reassured once and once again! It has been my habit during mirk to sleep behind triply locked doors, but Your Force's assurances make such precautions redundant."

Efraim wondered: did she flaunt? Did she entice? Did she tease? He said: "I might change my mind. I have adopted certain off-planet attitudes and they prompt me to confess that I find you fascinating."

"Psssh. These are matters we must not discuss." Sthelany, however, showed no sign of outrage.

"And what of the three bolts?"

Sthelany laughed: a cool little tinkle. "I cannot imagine Your Force engaging in such an outrageous and undignified escapade; the bolts are evidently unnecessary."

Even as they spoke Furaad, slipping low to the horizon, dipped half-under, and the sky went dim. Sthelany, her mouth half-open in an expression of almost child-like wonder, exclaimed: "Is

mirk upon us? I feel a strange emotion."

Her emotion, thought Efraim, seemed real enough: color had come to her cheeks, her bosom heaved, her eyes glowed with dark light. Furad sank even lower, almost leaving the smoky orange sky: was mirk on them indeed? Sthelany gasped and seemed to sway toward Efraim; he sensed her fragrance and almost as he reached to touch her hand, she pointed. "Furad floats once more; mirk is averted, and all things live!"

With no more words Sthelany moved away across the terrace. She paused to touch a white flower growing in a pot, turned a fleeting glance back over her shoulder, and then she moved on.

Efraim presently went into the castle, and descended to the office. In the corridor he came upon Destian, apparently bound to the same destination. Destian however gave a frigid nod and turned aside. Efraim closed the door, telephoned the rental agency at Port Mar and ordered out an air-car, requesting a pilot other than the redoubtable Flaussig. He left the office, hesitated, turned back, locked the door and took away the key.

Chapter 9

EFFRAIM AND Matho Lorcas climbed into the air-car and were carried high above the valley of the Esch River: up, up, until they

hovered on a level with the surrounding peaks. Efraim named them off: "Horsuke, Gleide Cliff, the Tassenberg; Alode the Cliff, Haujefolge, Scarlume the Devil Dragon, Bryn the Hero; Kamr, Dimw and Danquil; Shanajra, the Bird Crag, Gossil the Traitor—notice the avalanches—Camanche, and there: Whispering Ridge. Criver: take us yonder to Whispering Ridge."

The peaks shifted across other farther peaks of other farther realms; under the cloud-piercing claw of Comanche, Whispering Ridge came into full view: an upland meadow rather than a true ridge, to the south overlooking Scharrode and the valley of the Esch, to the north the multiple valleys of Eccord. The air-car landed; Efraim and Lorcas jumped out into ankle-deep grass.

The air was calm. Trees grew in copses; Whispering Ridge was like an island in the sky, a place of total peace. Efraim held up his hand. "Listen!"

From an indeterminate source came a low whisper, fluctuating almost musically, sometimes sighing into silence, sometimes almost singing.

"Wind?" Lorcas looked at the trees. "The leaves are still. The air is still."

"Strange in itself. Up here one would expect a wind."

They moved across the sward. In the shade of the forest Efraim noticed a group of Fwai-chi watching them impassively. Lorcas and

Efraim halted. "There they stand," said Lorcas, "walking their 'Path through Life', all shags and tatters, typical pilgrims in any language."

They continued across the meadow and looked over Eccord. Belrod Strang was lost among the folds of the forested hills. "The view is superb," said Lorcas. "Do you intend to deal generously with Rianlle?"

"No. The fact remains that he could send a thousand men up tomorrow to clear the site, and another thousand to start building his pavilion, and I could do very little to stop him."

"Peculiar," said Lorcas. "Peculiar indeed."

"How so?"

"This place is magnificent—superb, in fact. I'd like a pavilion here myself. But the realms are thick with places like this. In Eccord alone there must be twenty sites as beautiful. Rianlle is capricious to insist on this particular spot."

"Odd, I agree."

They turned back across the meadow, to find four Fwai-chi awaiting them.

As Efraim and Lorcas approached they drew a few steps back, hissing and rumbling among themselves.

The two men halted. Efraim said: "You appear disturbed. We are bothering you?"

One spoke in a guttural version of Gaean: "We walk the Life Road. It is a serious work. We do

not wish to watch men. Why do you come here?"

"For no particular purpose: to look about a bit."

"I see you plan no harm. This is our place, reserved to us by a very old treaty with the Kaiarks. Do you not know? I see you do not know."

Efraim gave a bitter laugh. "I know nothing—of the treaty or anything else. A Fwai drug took my memory. Is there an antidote?"

"There is no antidote. The poison breaks the roads to the memory tablets. These roads will never mend. Still, you must remind your Kaiark—"

"I am the Kaiark."

"Then you must know that the treaty is real."

"The treaty won't mean much if the land is transferred to Eccord."

"That may not be done. We told each other the word 'forever'."

"I would like to see this treaty myself," said Efraim. "I will carefully check my records."

"The treaty is not among your records," said the Fwai-chi, and the group shuffled back to the forest. Efraim and Lorcas stood looking after them."

"Now what did he mean by that?" demanded Efraim in wonder.

"He seems to feel that you won't find the treaty."

"We'll soon find out," said Efraim.

They continued across the

meadow toward the air-car.

Lorcas paused and looked up toward Camanche. "I can explain the whisper. The wind pushes up over Camanche, and around. It splits and swirls and passes the meadow by. We hear innumerable small frictions: the sound of air against air."

"You may be right. Still I prefer other explanations."

"Such as?"

"The foot-steps of a million dead pilgrims; cloud faeries; Camanche reckoning up the seconds."

"More convincing, I agree. Where to now?"

"Your idea of twenty equivalent sites in Eccord is interesting. I would like to discover these sites."

They flew north, through the peaks, domes and ridges of Eccord, and in an hour discovered a dozen high meadows with prospects at least as appealing as those of Whispering Ridge . . . "Rianlle is most arbitrary," said Lorcas. "The question is: Why?"

"I cannot even speculate."

"Suppose he gains the meadow and proceeds with his plans: what of the Fwai-chi?"

"I doubt if Rianlle would enjoy Fwai-chi pilgrims trooping through his pavilion, resting on his terraces. But how could he stop them? They are protected by the Connatic."

The air-car spiraled down into Scharrode and landed at Benbuphar Strang. As the two alight-

ed Efraim said: "Would you not like to return to Port Mar? I value your companionship, but there is nothing to amuse you here; I foresee only unpleasantness."

"The temptation to leave is strong," Lorcas admitted. "The food here is abominable, and I don't like to eat in a closet. Singhalissa oppresses me with her cleverness; Destian is insufferable. As for Sthelany—ah, the magic Sthelany! I hope to persuade her to Port Mar for a visit. This may seem an impossible task but every journey begins with a single step."

"So then, you plan to stay at Benbuphar Strang?"

"With your permission, still a week or two."

Efraim dismissed the air-car; the two returned to the castle. "You have exercised your charm upon her?"

Lorcas nodded. "She is curiously ambiguous. To say that she blows first hot then cold is inaccurate; she blows first cold, then colder. But she could easily order me to keep my distance."

"Has she mentioned the horrors of mirk?"

"She assures me that she bolts her doors with three bars, clamps her windows, keeps vials of offensive odors at the ready, and generally is unavailable."

They halted and looked up at the balcony behind which were Sthelany's rooms.

"A pity the mirk-way is blocked," mused Lorcas. "When all

else fails one can always pounce on a girl through the dark. Still she's hinted rather pointedly that I'm not to come around. In fact, after I tried to kiss her in the Graden of Bitter Odors she told me quite bluntly to keep my distance."

"Why not try Singhalissa? Or has she also warned you off?"

"What a thought! I suggest that we take a quiet bottle of wine together and search the archives for the Fwai-chi treaty."

THE INDEX to the Archives mentioned no treaty with the Fwai-chi. Efraim summoned Agnois, who denied all knowledge of the document. "Such an understanding, Your Force, would hardly be expressed as a formal treaty in any case."

"Perhaps not. Why does Rianlle want Whispering Ridge?"

Agnois raised his eyes to a point above Efraim's head. "I suppose that he intends to build there a summer pavilion, Force."

"Surely Rianlle treated with the Kaiark Jochaim on this matter?"

"I cannot say, Your Force."

"Who maintains the archives?"

"The Kaiark himself, with such help as he requires."

At Efraim's nod, Agnois departed.

"So now; no treaty," said Efraim glumly. "Nothing whatever to show Rianlle!"

"The Fwai-chi declared as much."

"How could they know? Our

archives are nothing to them!"

"The treaty probably was an oral understanding; they knew that no document existed."

In frustration Efraim jumped to his feet. "I must take counsel; the situation has become intolerable." Once again he summoned Agnois.

"Your Force requires?"

"Send messages to the eidarks; I wish them to meet me here in twenty hours. The occasion is urgent; I will expect everyone."

"That hour, Your Force, will fall in the middle period of mirk."

"Oh . . . In thirty hours, then. Another matter: do not inform Singhalissa of this meeting, nor Destian, nor Sthelany, nor anyone who might transfer this news; further, do not give instructions within the hearing of these people, and do not make note of the occasion upon paper. Am I sufficiently explicit?"

"Perfectly so, Your Force."

Agnois departed the room.

"If he fails me this time," said Efraim, "he'll not find me lenient." He went to the window, and presently observed the exit of six under-chamberlains. "There they go with the message. The news will reach Singhalissa as soon as they return, but there is little she can do."

Lorcas said: "She's probably resigned herself to the inevitable by now. And yonder on the terrace, is that not Sthelany? With your permission, I will go out and enliven her life."

"As you like. But one word,

while the thought is on my mind. That word is 'caution'. Mirk approaches. Unpleasant events occur. Lock yourself in your chambers, go to sleep and don't stir till the light returns."

"Reasonable enough," said Lorcas slowly. "I wouldn't care to meet any gharks nor, for that matter, any hoos."

Chapter 10

AFTER SIX HOURS of aud, Furad and Osmo left the sky. Cirse and Maddar, instead of slanting toward the horizon, settled vertically with ponderous purpose. Maddar disappeared first, to leave the land momentarily in green rowan, then Cirse sank behind Whispering Ridge. The sky flared and dimmed; darkness fell. Mirk had come to Scharrode.

In the farmsteads lights flared and flickered, then were extinguished; in the town shutters clanged, doors slammed, bolts thudded home. Those secure or fearful or uninterested in adventure took themselves to bed. Others by candle-light denuded themselves, then donned black shoulder pieces, black boots and a hideous manmask. Others removed gray gauze gowns, to don loose smocks of white muslin; then they loosened the shutters of their windows or the bolts of their doors, but never both; then, with a small taper in one corner of the room casting almost no light at all, they lay themselves on their

couches in a tremulous mixture of hope and fear, or a peculiar emotion in which perhaps one component was muted horror. Some who had bolted both shutters and door, to huddle on their couches in a ferment of aching melancholy, presently arose to unbolt door or shutter.

Through the mirk moved the grotesque shapes, taking no heed of each other. When one found the window of his choice unshuttered, he hung a white flower on the hasp, that no one else should enter, then climbing through the window displayed himself to the silent occupant of the room: an avatar of the demon Kro.

At Benbuphar Strang, lights were extinguished, doors bolted, windows shuttered and barred as everywhere else. In the servants quarters, some made preparations; others composed themselves to uneasy slumber. In the towers, other folk performed their own arrangements. Efraim, armed with his small pistol, bolted shutters, barred and bolted doors, searched his quarters. He checked the security of the door blocking ingress from the Sacarlatto and also that passage to the second level of Jaher Tower.

He then returned to the parlor where he threw himself into a great scarlet leather chair, poured himself a goblet of wine, and sat in gloomy meditation.

He reviewed his time on Marune, and tried to assess his progress. His memory was yet

gone, his enemy still unknown. Time passed. Faces floated before his eyes. One face returned and would not depart: a pale fragile face with lustrous eyes. She had as much as assured him that her door would not be bolted. He jumped to his feet and paced back and forth. A hundred yards away she waited. Efraim stopped short and considered. No harm could come by making a trial. He need only climb to the second level of Jaher Tower, inspect the corridor; then, if all were clear, stride fifty feet to her door. Should the door be locked, he could return the way he had come. Should the door be open: Sthelany expected him.

The mask? The boots? No, they were foreign to him; he would enter Sthelany's chamber as himself.

He climbed the steps of the short-cut and came to the exit panel. He slid aside the peephole, searched the corridor: empty.

He opened the door and listened. Silence. A faint sound? He listened with even greater intensity. The sound might have been the blood rushing through his heart.

With stealth and care he opened the door a foot, two feet. He slipped out into the hall, feeling suddenly exposed and vulnerable. No one in sight; no sound. With racing pulse he ran to Sthelany's door. He listened. No sound. He inspected the door: six panels of heavy carved oak; three

iron hinges, a heavy iron latch.

So now. He reached for the latch . . .

A sound within, a scraping as of metal. Efraim backed away and stood looking at the door. It seemed to look back at him.

Efraim moved further from the door, confused, uncertain; he retreated to the passage, closed and bolted the door, returned to his chambers.

He sank into the red leather chair and thought for five minutes. Once again he rose to his feet and, unbarring the main portal, went out into the foyer. In a storage closet he found a length of rope which he took back into his chamber, and again locked the door.

He brought out the chart of the mirk-ways and studied it for a few minutes. He then went up to the Sacarlatto, and so made his way to that unoccupied chamber directly above that of Sthelany.

He went out onto the balcony, made the rope fast, and tied a series of knots along its length, to serve as hand-grasps and foot-rests. Cautiously he lowered the rope so that it hung down to Sthelany's balcony.

He descended with great care, and presently stood on the balcony. Shutters covered the glass, but a glow of light issued through a crack. Efraim pressed his eye close and peered into the room.

Sthelany sat beside a table in her usual garments. By the light of a candle she played with a toy

puzzle. Beside the door stood two men in black pantaloons and man-masks. One carried a mace, the other a dagger. Behind the door, over the back of a chair, hung a large black sack. The man with the mace pressed his ear to the door. By his posture, by the stoop of his shoulders and long powerful arms, Efraim recognized Agnois the First Chamberlain. The man with the dagger was Destian. Sthelany glanced at them, gave a slight shrug, and returned to her puzzle.

Efraim felt dizzy. He leaned on the balcony and looked off into the darkness. His stomach convulsed; he barely prevented himself from vomiting.

He did not look again into the room. With flaccid muscles he pulled himself back to the upper balcony. He hauled up the rope, coiled it and returned to his chambers. Here he made everything secure, and placing his pistol on the table before him, poured out a goblet of wine and settled into the red leather chair.

Chapter 11

OSMO ROSE in the east, followed by Cirse from the south and Maddar from the south-west to dispel the dark with the gay light of isp.

Matho Lorcas was missing from his chambers; nor was he to be found anywhere within Benbuphar Strang.

The mood in the castle was taut

and sullen. Agnois brought word to Efraim that Singhalissa wished an audience with him.

"She must wait until after I confer with the eiodarks," said Efraim. He could not bring himself to look at Agnois.

"I will so inform her, Your Force." Agnois' voice was gentle. "I must call to your attention a message from Kaiark Rianlle of Eccord to the members of the kaiarkal household. He invites you most urgently to a fête at Belrod Strang, during aud tomorrow."

"I will visit Belrod Strang with pleasure."

Hours of time moved past; Efraim went out into the meadow beside the castle, then wandered down beside the river. For half an hour he stood tossing stones into the water, then turned and looked back toward Benbuphar Strang—a silhouette of sinister significance.

Where was Matho Lorcas?

Efraim sauntered back to the castle. He climbed the flight of steps to the terrace and halted, reluctant to enter the oppressive dimness.

He forced himself to proceed. Sthelany, leaving the library, paused, as if wishing words with him. Efraim walked past without so much as a side-glance; in truth he dared not look at her, lest she read in his eyes the intensity of his emotion.

Sthelany stood looking after him: a forlorn and thoughtful figure.

At the time appointed, Efraim

came forth from his chambers to greet the fourteen eiodarks of Scharrode, all wearing ceremonial black gowns and white vests. Their faces wore almost identical expressions of skepticism, even hostility.

Efraim ushered them into the Grand Parlor, where footmen and under-chamberlains had arranged a circular table. At the tail of the procession came Destian, dressed like the others. Efraim spoke crisply: "I do not recall summoning you to this meeting, Squire Destian, and in any event your presence will not be required."

Destian paused, glanced around the eiodarks. "What is the will of this company?"

Efraim signaled a footman: "Expel Squire Destian instantly from the chamber, by whatever means you find necessary."

Destian managed a mocking grin, turned on his heel and departed. Efraim closed the door and joined his company. "This is an informal meeting. Feel at liberty to express yourselves openly and candidly; I will respect you the more for it."

"Very good," spoke one of the older eiodarks, a man solid and sturdy, brown as weathered wood. This was Baron Haulk, as Efraim would presently learn. "I will take you at your word. Why have you expelled the Kang Destian from a colloquy of his peers?"

"There are several excellent reasons for my act, and you will learn some of them presently, if

not all. I will remind you that by protocols of rank, his title is only as good as that of his mother. As soon as I became Kaiark, she resumed her former status as the Wirwove of Urrue and Destian lapsed to Squire. A technicality perhaps, but by just such technicalities and I Kaiark and you Eiodark."

Efraim went to his place at the table. "Please be seated. I am sorry to have delayed so long with this meeting. Perhaps this apparent slight explains your lack of cordiality; am I correct?"

"Not entirely," said Baron Haulk in a dry voice.

"You have other grievances?"

"You have asked us to speak candidly. Historically those foolish enough to accept such invitations usually suffer for their boldness. Nevertheless, I will take the risk upon myself.

"Our grievances are these. First, the indifference which you show the glorious tradition of your station, and I refer to the frivolous manner in which you return to claim your place only a few days before the deadline."

"I will consider this Item One," said Efraim. "Proceed."

"Item Two. Since your return you have neglected to consult the eiodarks in regard to the urgencies which confront the realm; instead you hobnob with a person of Port Mar, whose reputation, so I have upon good authority, does him no credit."

"Item Three: In a most callous

manner you have insulted and inconvenienced the Kraike Singhalissa, the Lissolet Sthelany and the Kang Destian, and deprived them of status and perquisites.

"Item Four. You have wilfully antagonized our ally Kaiark Rianlle of Eccord, while ignoring the bandit Gosso, who slew Kaiark Jochaim.

"Item Five. As I recite these grievances, you listen with a face of bored amusement and obduracy."

Efraim could not restrain a chuckle. "I thank you for your frankness. I shall respond in the same spirit. The 'amused boredom' and 'obduracy' of 'Item Five' are far from my true emotions, I assure you. Before I reveal certain strange circumstances to you, may I ask whence came your information?"

"The Kang Destian has been good enough to keep us informed."

"I thought as much. Now, draw up your chairs and listen closely, and you will learn what has befallen me during these last months..."

Efraim spoke for an hour, withholding mention only of the events during mirk. "To summarize, I returned to Scharrode as soon as possible; I delayed meeting the eiodarks because I wished to conceal my disability until I had in some measure repaired it; I proposed a truce to Gosso because war with Gorgetto is weary, hateful and unproductive. Neither

Gosso nor his Gorgets killed the Kaiark Jochaim; he was murdered by a Scharde traitor."

"Murder!" The word seemed to echo from wall to wall of the Grand Parlor.

"As to Rianlle and his demands for Whispering Ridge, I acted as any responsible Scharde Kaiark must act: I temporized until I could search the archives and discover what, if any, had been his understanding with the Kaiark Jochaim. I found no such record. In company with Matho Lorcass, I inspected Whispering Ridge. Certainly a beautiful site for a summer pavilion, but no more so than a dozen similar sites within Eccord itself. I called you here to make an exposition of the facts, and to request your best advice."

Baron Faroz said: "The question immediately arises: why does Rianlle want Whispering Ridge?"

"The single distinguishing feature to Whispering Ridge, aside from the whisper itself, seems to be the Fwai-chi regard for the place. Whispering Ridge is their sanctuary, a station along their Path of Life. The Fwai-chi claim an accord with the Kaiarks of Scharrode in regard to Whispering Ridge: I can find no mention of this accord in the archives. So then, gentlemen, what answer shall I take the Kaiark Rianlle when I visit Belrod Strang?"

Baron Haulk said: "I doubt if we need to vote. We refuse to cede Whispering Ridge. However, put this refusal in delicate

language, in order that he may save face. It is not necessary to fling the refusal in his teeth."

Baron Alifer said: "We might declare that Whispering Ridge is prone to earthquakes and we will not permit our friend thus to risk himself."

Baron Barwatz suggested: "The pact with the Fwai-chi must carry weight. We can show reluctance on this basis."

"I will carefully consider all your suggestions," said Efraim. "In the meantime I trust no one now at Benbuphar Strang. I want a complete change of staff, with the exception of Agnois. He must not be allowed to leave. Who will see to this?"

Baron Denzil said: "I will do so, Your Force."

"A second matter. My friend and confidante Matho Lorcas disappeared during mirk."

"Many persons disappear during mirk, Your Force."

"This is a special case, which I must investigate. Baron Erthe, will you be good enough to initiate a search?"

"I will do so, Your Force."

THE AIR-CAR conveyed Efraim, Singhalissa, Sthelany and Destian high over the mountains. Conversation was limited to formal exchanges. Efraim for the most part sat silently looking across the landscape. From time to time he felt Sthelany's covert gaze, and once she essayed a wan secret smile, which Efraim looked

blankly past. Sthelany's charm had completely evaporated; he could hardly bear her proximity. Singhalissa and Destian discussed their cogences, a common topic during Rhune conversations. Singhalissa, among her other competences, carved cameos upon carnelians, moon-stones, chalcidony and chrysoprase; Destian collected precious minerals, and these particular cogences complemented each other.

The air-car passed above Whispering Ridge. Destian explained the geology of the region: "Essentially a great hummock of diabase broken by pegmatite dikes. A few garnets can be found in the outcrops and occasionally a tourmaline of no great value. The Fwai-chi chip them out and keep them for souvenirs, so I'm told."

"The Dwan Jar then lacks mineral wealth?"

"For all practical purposes."

Singhalissa turned to Efraim: "What are your thoughts regarding this bit of hillside?"

"It is a delightful site for a pavilion. The fabled 'whisper' is discernible as a pleasant half-heard sound."

"It would seem then that you have decided to implement the agreement between the Kaiarks Jochaim and Rianlle." Singhalissa spoke half-musingly, with the air of one reckoning imponderables.

"You state the matter too conclusively," said Efraim in a guarded voice. "Nothing is yet determined. I must verify the terms

and in fact the very existence of this agreement."

Singhalissa raised her fine black eyebrows. "Surely you do not question Rianlle's word?"

"Decidedly not," said Efraim. "Still, he may have mistaken the force of the agreement. Remember, an ancient treaty with the Fwai-chi controls the region and may not honorably be ignored."

Singhalissa smiled her wintry smile. "Kaiark Rianlle might well concede the authority of this early treaty, if in fact it exists."

"We shall see. The subject probably will not arise; we have been invited to a fête, not a set of negotiations."

"We shall see."

The air-car dropped on a long slant toward Elde, Eccord's principle village. Nearby four rivers had been diverted to create a circular waterway. At the middle of the central island stood Belrod Strang: a palace built of pale gray stone and white enameled timber, with pink, black and silver banderoles flying from eighteen minarets. By comparison Benbuphar Strang seemed dingy and grim.

The air-car landed before the main gates; the four alighted to be met by six youthful heralds carrying gonfalons and twenty musicians pumping forth a frantic fanfare on their bruehorns.

The new arrivals were conducted to private chambers, in order that they might refresh

themselves. The chambers were luxurious past the scope of Efraim's experience. He bathed in a pool of scented water, then resumed his old garments rather than use the flaring black gown lined with flame-colored silk which had been laid out for his use. An inconspicuous door led to a water-closet and a refectory, where dishes of coarse bread, cheese, cold meat and sour beer were laid out.

Kaiark Rianlle welcomed the four in his Grand Reception Hall. On hand also were the Kraike Dervas, a tall somber woman who spoke little, and the Lissolet Maerio, reportedly Dervas' daughter by Rianlle. The relationship could easily be credited; Maerio displayed Rianlle's topaz hair and clearly modeled features. She was a person of no great stature, slight and supple, and carried herself with barely restrained animation, like an active child on its best behavior. Her amber ringlets and clear tawny skin invested her with luminosity. From time to time Efraim noticed her watching him with mournful solemnity.

Belrod Strang far exceeded Benbuphar Strang in splendor, though it fell short in that quality expressed by the Rhune term which might be translated as 'tragic grandeur'. Kaiark Rianlle conducted himself with great affability, showing Singhalissa a conspicuous consideration which Efraim thought somewhat tactless.

The Kraike Dervas behaved with formal courtesy, speaking without expression, as if reciting phrases which had become automatic to persons among whom she could not differentiate. The Lissolet Maerio by contrast seemed self-conscious and almost awkward. Surreptitiously she studied Efraim; from time to time their eyes met and Efraim wondered how he could ever have been attracted to Sthelany, who during mirk had worked her toy puzzle. A young black wasp was Sthelany, in company with the old black wasp who was Singhalissa.

Rianlle presently took his guests into the Scarlet Rotunda; a twenty-sided chamber with a scarlet carpet under a multi-crystalline dome, fashioned like a glittering twenty-sided snowflake. A chandelier of a hundred thousand scintillas hung over a table of pink marble, the centerpiece of which was a representation of Kaiark Rianlle's projected pavilion on Whispering Ridge. Rianlle indicated the model with a gesture and a quiet smile, then disposed his guests about the table. Into the chamber came a tall man in a gray robe embroidered with black and red cusps; he pushed before him a two-wheeled cart which he stationed near Rianlle, then folded back the top to reveal trays and racks containing hundreds of vials. Maerio, sitting next to Efraim, told him: "This is Berhalten, the Master Contriver; do you know of him?"

"No."

Maerio looked right and left, lowered her voice so that Efraim alone could hear. "They say you have lost your memory; is this true?"

"Unfortunately yes."

"And that is why you disappeared from Port Mar?"

"I suppose so. I'm not certain of all the facts."

Maerio spoke in a voice almost inaudible. "It is my fault."

Efraim was immediately interested. "How so?"

"Do you remember that we were all at Port Mar together?"

"I know this to be the case, but I don't remember."

"We spoke with an off-worlder named Lorcas. I did something he suggested. You were so stunned and shamed that your reason left you."

Efraim made a skeptical sound. "What did you do?"

"I could never tell you. I was giddy and wild; I acted on impulse."

"Did I lose my reason immediately?"

"Not immediately."

"I probably wasn't overwhelmed with horror. I doubt if you could shame me no matter how hard you tried." Efraim spoke with more fervor than he had intended. Maerio looked a bit confused.

"You must not talk like that."

"Do you find me so offensive?"

She turned him a quick side-look. "You know better than that

... No. Of course not. You've forgotten all about me."

"As soon as I saw you I began to learn all over again."

Maerio whispered: "I'm afraid that you'll go mad again."

"I never went mad to begin with."

The Kaiark Rianlle spoke across the table. "I notice your admiration of the pavilion I hope to build on Whispering Ridge."

"I find the design most attractive," said Efraim. "It is interesting and well thought out, and could easily be adapted to an alternate site."

"I trust there will be no need for that?"

"I have conferred with my eidarks. Like myself they are reluctant to cede Scharrode territory. There are also practical difficulties in the way."

"All very well to talk of practicality," said Rianlle, still heavily jovial. "The fact remains that I have set my heart upon Whispering Ridge."

"The decision really lies beyond my discretion," said Efraim. "No matter how much I might wish to oblige you I am bound by our covenant with the Fwai-chi."

"I would like to see a copy of this covenant. Perhaps it was established for some fixed duration of time."

"I am not sure that a written version exists."

Rianlle leaned back in his chair in disbelief. "Then how can you so staunchly affirm its reality?"

Where have you learned its provisions? Through your own recollection?"

"The Fwai-chi have described the covenant; they are quite definite."

"The Fwai-chi are notoriously vague. On so tenuous a basis would you thwart the understanding between myself and the Kaiark Jochaim?"

"I would not wish to do so under any circumstances. Perhaps you will supply me with a copy of this agreement that I may show my eidarks."

Rianlle stared at him coldly. "I would find undignified the necessity to document my clear recollections."

"Your recollections are not in question," Efraim assured him. "I wonder only how the Kaiark Jochaim could bring himself to ignore the Fwai-chi covenant. I must search my archives with great diligence."

"You are unwilling to cede Whispering Ridge on a basis of trust and cooperation?"

"I certainly cannot make important decisions precipitously."

Rianlle clamped shut his mouth and swung around in his chair. "I commend to your attention the artistry of Berhalten, who has a novel concept to introduce."

Berhalten, having completed his preparations, struck a rod with his knee, to sound a reverberent gong. From the passage seven pages in scarlet and white livery ran forth. Each carried on a silver

tray a small ewer. Into each of these ewers Berhalten placed a cylinder of a solid substance, layered in eight colors, whereupon the pages took up tray and ewer and set it before each person at the table. Berhalten then inclined his head to Rianlle, closed up his cart, and stood waiting.

Rianlle said, "Berhalten has discovered an amusing new principle. Notice the golden button on top of the ewer. Press this button; it releases an agent to activate the odorifer. You will be charmed. . . ."

RIANLLE CONDUCTED the group to a balcony overlooking a large circular stage, constructed to represent a Rhune landscape. To right and left waterfalls cascaded from stone crags, forming streams which flowed into a central pool. A chime sounded, to initiate a wild clamor of gongs and florid bruehorns, controlled by a staccato brazen tone which varied in only three degrees.* From opposite directions advanced two bands of warriors in fanciful armor, grotesque metal masks, and helmets crested with spikes and barbs. They advanced with stylistic kicks and curious bent-legged strides, then attacked, and fought in ritual attitudes, to the wailing

*The Rhunes produce no true music and are incapable of thinking in musical terms. Their fanfares and clamors are controlled by mathematical progressions, and must achieve a mathematical symmetry. The exercise is intellectual rather than emotional.

clatter of martial instruments. Rianlle and Singhalissa, at one side, spoke together briefly. Efraim sat at the far end with Sthelany beside him. Destian conversed with Maerio, his exact profile tilted to advantage. The Kraike Dervas sat staring at the ballet with eyes that seemed not to follow the movement. Sthelany turned a glance toward Efraim which in those uncertain days before mirk might have caused him inner palpitations. She spoke in a soft voice: "Do you enjoy this dance?"

"The performers are very skillful. I am not a good judge of such things."

"Why are you so distant? You have hardly spoken for days."

"You must forgive me; I find the effort of ruling Scharrode no easy matter."

"When you traveled off-planet, you must have known many interesting events."

"True."

"Are the folk of the outer worlds as gluttonous and sebal as we tend to believe?"

"Their habits certainly are different from those of the Realms."

"And how did you regard these folk? Were you appalled?"

"I was in no condition to worry about anything but my own troubles."

"Ah! Cannot you answer me without evasion?"

"In all honesty, I fear that my casual remarks, should they be reported to your mother, might

well be distorted and used to discredit me."

Sthelany sat back. For several moments she watched the ballet, which now had reached a climax with the entry of the two legendary champions Hys and Zan-Immariot.

Sthelany again turned to Efrain. "You misjudge me. I do not tell everything to Singhalissa. Do you think that I do not feel stifled at Benbuphar Strang? I yearn for new experience! Perhaps you will think ill of me for my candor, but sometimes I constrain myself to prevent outbursts of emotion. Singhalissa glorifies rigid convention; I often feel that convention must apply to others but not me. Why should folk not decorously sip wine together as they do in Port Mar? You need not look at me with such wonder; I will show you that I too can transcend convention!"

"Such occasions might well relieve the tedium. However, Singhalissa would surely disapprove."

Sthelany smiled. "Need Singhalissa know everything?"

"Very definitely not. Still she is an expert both at conducting intrigues and at sniffing them out."

"We shall see." Sthelany gave a breathless little laugh and sat back in her chair. On the stage Hys and Zan-Immariot had fought to mutual exhaustion. The lights dimmed; the instrumental tones descended in pitch and tempo, then became silent, save for a thrilling resonance of softly rub-

bed gongs. "Mirk!" whispered Sthelany.

Out upon the stage bounded three entities in costumes of black horn and lacquered beetle-back, wearing demon-masks.

Sthelany leaned closer to Efrain. "The three avatars of Kro: Maiesse, Goun and Sciaffrod. Notice how the champions strive! Ah! they are slain. The demons dance in triumph!" Sthelany turned toward Efrain; her shoulder touched his. "How it must be on the one-sun worlds where day and mirk alternate!"

Efrain glanced sidewise. Sthelany's face was close; her eyes shone in the stage-glow. Efrain said: "Your mother looks this way. Peculiar! She seems neither surprised nor annoyed that we talk in an intimate manner."

Sthelany stiffened and leaning forward watched the demons stamping the corpses of the dead heroes into the dust, throwing their heads low, tossing them high, plunging arms low, thrusting them high.

LATER, as the four guests took their leave, Efrain had a moment to pay his respects to Maerio. She said, somewhat wistfully, "I did not appreciate that you had become friendly with Sthelany. She is most fascinating."

Efrain managed a painful grin. "Appearances can be deceiving. Can you, will you, be discreet?"

"Of course."

"I believe that Singhalissa in-

structed Sthelany to pretend intimacy, to beguile me into a foolish act whereby she might discredit me with the Scharde eiodarks. In fact—”

Maerio asked breathlessly, “In fact, what?”

Efraim found that he could not express himself both with precision and delicacy. “I will tell you some other time. But it is you, not Sthelany, whom I find fascinating.”

Maerio’s eyes suddenly glistered. “Goodby, Efraim.”

As Efraim turned away he surprised Sthelany’s gaze upon him, and it seemed that he saw there a hurt, wild, desperate expression. This was the same face, Efraim reminded himself, which had indifferently considered the workings of a toy puzzle while two men with mace, dagger and sack waited by the door.

Efraim went to make his formal farewell to the Kaiark Rianlle. “Your hospitality is on a most magnificent scale. We could not think to duplicate it at Benbuphar Strang. Still I am hoping that before long you will return our visit, in company of course with the Kraike and the Lissolet.”

Rianlle’s face showed no geniality. He said: “I accept the invitation, for myself and for the Kraike and Lissolet as well. Will you think me presumptuous if I set the occasion for three days hence? You will have had opportunity to search for the legendary covenant, and also to consult your eiodarks,

and to convince them that the accord of Kaiark Jochaim and myself must without fail be implemented.”

Words pressed against Efraim’s lips; he contained them with an effort.

“I will consult my eiodarks,” he said at last. “We will reach a decision which may or may not please you, but which will be based upon how we regard our duty. In any event we shall look forward to entertaining you at Benbuphar Strang at the time you suggest.”

Chapter 12

AT BENBUPHAR STRANG the portals were thrown wide by footmen strange to Efraim.

Singhalissa stopped short. “Who are these people? Where is our old staff?”

“I have replaced them,” said Efraim. “All except Agnois, whom you will still find a office.”

Singhalissa turned him a curious glance. “Must all our arrangements be disrupted? Why have you done this?”

Efraim spoke in his most formal voice. “I wish to live among people who have no prior loyalties and in whom I can place reliance. I took steps to achieve this by the only possible means: a complete change.”

“My life daily grows more hectic,” cried Singhalissa. “I wonder where this turmoil will end! Do you also plan to take us to war for a miserable fragment of hillside?”

"I would like to know why Rianlle is so exercised over this 'miserable fragment of hillside.' Do you know?"

"I am not in the Kaiark Rianlle's confidence."

A footman approached. "Your Force, the Baron Erthe is at hand."

"Please introduce him."

The Baron Erthe came forward. He looked from Efraim to Singhalissa and back to Efraim. "Your Force, I have a report to render."

"Speak."

"In a rubbish heap near Howar Forest we discovered a corpse in a black sack. It has been identified as the remains of Matho Lorcas."

Efraim's stomach quivered. He looked at Singhalissa, who showed no emotion. But for a soft metallic scrape behind the door he would have been the corpse in the black sack, rather than Matho Lorcas.

"Bring the corpse to the terrace."

"Very well, Your Force."

Singhalissa said softly, "Why do you do that?"

"Can't you guess?"

Singhalissa turned slowly away. Efraim summoned Agnois. "Place a trestle or a bench on the terrace."

Agnois allowed an expression of puzzlement to cross his features. "At once, Your Force."

Four men carried a coffin across the terrace, and set it down upon the trestle. Efraim took a breath and lifted the lid. For a moment

he looked down into the dead face, then he turned to Agnois. "Bring the mace."

"Yes, Force." Agnois started away, then halted and stared back aghast. "Which mace, Force? There are a dozen on the wall of the trophy room."

"The mace with which the Noble Lorcas was murdered."

Agnois turned and walked slowly into the castle. Efraim gritting his teeth, examined the corpse. The head was crushed, and a wound in the back gave evidence of a dagger thrust.

"Close the lid," said Efraim. "There is no more to be learned. Where is Agnois? He loiters, he tarries!" He signaled a footman. "Find Agnois, ask him to make haste."

The footman presently returned on the run. "Agnois is dead, Force. He has taken poison."

Efraim clapped him on the back. "Return within; make inquiries! Discover the circumstances!"

He turned sadly back to Baron Erthe. "One of the murderers has escaped me. Be so good as to bury this poor corpse."

In due course the footman reported his findings. Agnois, upon entering the castle apparently had gone directly to his quarters and there swallowed a fatal draught.

EFRAIM BATHED HIMSELF with unwonted zeal. He made a dismal meal in his refectory, then lay down on his couch. For six hours

he dozed, tossed, twisted, dreamed evil dreams, then slept soundly from sheer exhaustion.

Efraim had not yet dismissed the air-car which had transported him to Belrod Strang. He now ordered the pilot to convey him up to Whispering Ridge.

The air-car rose into the light of the colored suns and flew north around the flank of Camanche, then drifted down to settle on the grass. Efraim alighted, and walked out across the meadow. The serenity was that of lost Arcadia; except for the crag to the east, the view was of clouds and air; isolation from the anxieties, plots and tragedies of Benbuphar Strang was complete.

At the center of the meadow he paused. The whisper was not perceptible. A moment passed. He heard a sigh, a mingling of a million soft tones, each no louder than a breath. The sigh became a murmur, faded tremulously, rose again, then dwindled toward silence—a sound of elemental melancholy . . . Efraim heaved a deep sigh of his own and turned toward the forest, to find, as before, a group of Fwai-chi watching from the shade. They shambling forward; he advanced to meet them.

"Before mirk I came here," said Efraim. "Perhaps I spoke to one of you?"

"We were all here."

"I am faced with problems, and they are your problems as well. The Kaiark of Eccord wants

Whispering Ridge. He wants to build a pavillion here for his pleasure."

"That is not our problem. It is yours. The men of Scharrode have promised to defend our holy place forever."

"So you say. Do you possess a document attesting to this agreement?"

"We have no document. The promise was exchanged with the kaiarks of old, and transferred to each successive kaiark."

"Kaiark Jochaim may so have informed me, but your drugs took my memory, and now I can assert nothing of my own knowledge."

"Still, you must enforce the covenant." The Fwai-chi returned into the forest.

Efraim despondently returned to Benbuphar Strang. He called a meeting of the eiodarks and reported Rianlle's demands. Certain of the eiodarks cried out for mobilization; others sat glum and silent.

"Rianlle is unpredictable," declared Efraim. "At least this is my opinion. Our preparation for war might dissuade him. On the other hand, he would not care to retreat before our defiance, when our resources are inferior to his. Perhaps he will send his troops to occupy the Dwan Jar and then ignore our protests."

"We should occupy the Dwan Jar first, and fortify it!" cried Baron Hectre. "Then we might ignore the protests of Rianlle!"

Baron Haulk said: "The concept

is attractive, but the terrain hinders us. He can bring his troops around Camanche and up Duwail Slope; we can supply our forces only by the trail across the front of Lor Cliff, and Rianlle alone on the brink could interdict us. We would more profitably fortify Bazon Scape and the pass at the head of the Gryphon's Claw, but there we invade Eccord soil and prompt sure retaliation."

"Let us look at the physiograph," said Efraim.

The group filed into the octagonal Hall of Strategies. For an hour they studied the thirty-foot long scale model of Scharrode and the adjoining lands, but only verified what they already knew: if Rianlle sent troops to occupy the Dwan Jar, then these troops would be vulnerable to attack along their supply routes and might well be marooned. "Rianlle may not be able to exercise his strength as effectively as he hopes," mused Baron Erthe. "We may force him into a stalemate."

"You are optimistic," said Baron Dasheil. "He can marshall three thousand sails. If he brings them here—" he pointed to a scarp overlooking the valley "—he can drop them down into Scharrode while our troops are occupied along Bazon Scape. We can either harass his position on the Dawn Jar, or we can guard the vale against his sails. I cannot define a system whereby we can do both."

Efraim asked; "How many sails can we ourselves muster?"

"We have fourteen hundred eagles and as many winglets."

"Perhaps we could send twenty-eight hundred sails against Belrod Strang."

"Suicide. The glide is too long; the air sweeps down the Groaning Crags."

The group returned to their places around the red syenite table.

Efraim said: "As I understand it, no one feels that we can effectively resist Eccord, if Rianlle decides to wage war in earnest. Am I right?"

No one contradicted him.

Efraim went on. "A point we have not discussed is this: why is Rianlle so anxious to obtain Dwan Jar? I cannot credit the 'pavilion' theory. I have just returned from Whispering Ridge. The beauty and isolation are too poignant to be borne; I could think only of human transience and the vanity of hope. Rianlle is proud and stubborn, but is he insensitive? I find his plans for a pavilion far-fetched."

"Agreed, Rianlle is proud and stubborn," said Baron Szantho, "but this fails to explain his initial commitment to the project."

"There is nothing else on the Dwan Jar but the Fwai-chi sanctuary," Efraim remarked. "What profit could he gain from the Fwai-chi?"

The eidarks considered the matter. Baron Alifer said tentatively: "I have heard a rumor that Rianlle's splendors exceed his in-

come, that Eccord cannot support his fantasies. I could not discredit a theory that he hopes to exploit a hitherto untouched resource: the Fwai-chi. To guard their sanctuary they would be forced to pay him a toll of drugs, crystals, elixirs."

Baron Haulk said: "None of this bears upon our own problems. We must decide upon a policy."

Efraim looked around the table. "We have examined all our options except one: submission to Rianlle's demands. Does the council believe this to be our only feasible course of action, detestable though it is?"

"Realistically, we have no other choice," muttered Baron Haulk.

Baron Nedtre pounded his fist on the table. "Can we not assume a defensive posture, even though it is only bluff? Rianlle may think better of forcing the issue!"

Efraim said: "Let us adjourn until next aud, and at that time we will reach a decision."

AGAIN Efraim met with his eiodarks. There was little conversation; all sat with glum faces. Efraim said, "I have searched the archives; I find no sure reference to an agreement with the Fwai-chi. They must be betrayed, and we must submit. Who disagrees?"

"I disagree," growled Baron Hectre. "I am willing to fight."

"I am willing to fight," said Baron Faroz, "but I do not care to destroy myself and my folk to no purpose. We must submit."

"We must submit," said Baron

Haulk.

Efraim said, "If the Kaiark Jochaim indeed acceded to Rianlle's demands, he must have been subjected to these same pressures. I hope that our humiliation serves a good purpose." He rose to his feet. "Rianlle arrives here tomorrow. I hope that all of you will be on hand, to lend the occasion dignity."

"We will be here."

Chapter 13

AN HOUR BEFORE arrival of the Kaiark Rianlle, the eiodarks gathered on the terrace of Benbuphar Strang. Through psychological processes perhaps differing from case to case many attitudes had hardened, and shameful misgivings had been converted into defiance. Where before all the eiodarks had resigned themselves to submission, now it seemed as if all had been inspired to obduracy.

"Rianlle challenged your memory?" cried out Baron Balthazar. "With reason, you admit. He cannot challenge mine. If the Fwai-chi declare the existence of this covenant and if the archives at least hint of its existence, then I distinctly recall the Kaiark Jochaim discussing this same covenant."

"I as well!" declared Baron Hectre. "He dare not challenge us."

Efraim laughed sadly. "He will dare; why not? You are powerless to damage him."

"This shall be our strategy," said Baron Balthazar. "We will deny his demands with fortitude. If he invests the Dwan Jar with his troops, we shall harass them and destroy his work. If Rianlle wafts his sails down into our vale, we shall plunge down from Alode Cliff and rip their wings."

Baron Simic shook his fists into the air. "It shall not be so easy for Rianlle after all!"

"Very well," said Efraim. "If this is how you feel, I am with you. Remember, we shall be firm but not pugnacious; we shall mention self-defense only if he threatens. I am glad that like myself you find submission intolerable. And there, I believe, around Shanajra, comes Rianlle and his party."

The air-car landed; Rianlle alighted, followed by the Kraike Dervas, the Lissolet Maerio, and four Eccord eiodarks. The heralds quick-stepped forth, producing ceremonial fanfares; Rianlle and his party marched to the steps leading up to the terrace; Efraim and the Scharde eiodarks descended to greet them.

Formalities were exchanged, then Rianlle, throwing back his handsome head, stated: "Today the Kaiarks of Scharrode and Eccord meet to certify an era of warm regard between their realms. It pleases me, therefore, to state that I will look favorably upon the possibility of trisme between yourself and the Lissolet Maerio."

Efraim bowed his head. "This is a most gracious proffer, Force, and nothing could accord more to my own inclinations. But you are fatigued from the journey; I must allow you to refresh yourself. In two hours we shall meet in the Grand Parlor."

"Excellent. I may assume that you have found no further objections to my little scheme?"

"You may be sure, Your Force, that good relations between our two realms, on the basis of equity and cooperation, are the foundation of Scharde policy."

Rianlle's face darkened. "Can you not respond to the point? Do you or do you not intend to cede the Dwan Jar?"

"Your Force, let us not transact our important business upon the front steps. When you have rested an hour or two, I will clarify the Scharde point of view."

Rianlle bowed, swung about; under-chamberlains conducted him and members of his party to the chambers which had been prepared for them.

MAERIO STOOD by a tall arched window looking out across the valley. She rubbed her hand on the stone sill, thrilling at the coarse contact. How would it be to live here at Benbuphar Strang, among these tall shadowy chambers, surrounded by echoes? Many strange events had occurred here, some of which made dreary listening; nowhere in all the Realms, so it was said, could be found a castle

so riddled with mirk-ways. Efraim had altered; as to this there was no denying. He seemed more mature, and he seemed to obey the Rhune conventions tentatively, without conviction. Perhaps this was all to the good. Her mother Dervas had once been as gay and as artless as herself, but Rianlle (whom she supposed to be her father) had insisted that the Kraike of Eccord must exemplify the Rhune Code, and Dervas was impelled to orthodoxy for the good of the realm . . . Maerio wondered about Efraim. He hardly seemed the sort to insist on orthodoxy. In fact, from her own experience, she knew better!

A slight sound behind her; she whirled about. A panel in the wainscoting had slid aside and there stood Efraim.

He crossed the room and stood smiling down into her face. "Forgive me for startling you. I wanted to see you secretly and alone, and I knew no other way."

Maerio looked toward the door. "Let me shoot the bolt; we must not be discovered."

"True." Efraim bolted the door and returned to Maerio. "I have been thinking of you; I cannot get you out of my mind."

"I have been thinking of you too, especially since I learned that the Kaiark planned to join us in trisme."

"That is what I must tell you. As much as I long for such a trisme, it will never occur, because the eiodarks intend to fight

rather than give up the Dwan Jar."

Maerio nodded slowly. "I knew that this would happen . . . I don't want to go in trisme anywhere else. What shall I do?"

"For now nothing. I can only make plans for war."

"You might be killed!"

"I hope not. Give me time to think. Would you run away with me, away from the Realms?"

Maerio asked breathlessly, "Where would we go?"

"I don't know. We would not be privileged as we are now; we might be forced to toil."

"I will go with you."

Efraim took her hands. She shivered and closed her eyes. "Efraim, please . . . You will lose your memory again."

"I don't think so." He kissed her forehead. She gasped and drew back.

"I feel so strange! Everyone will recognize my emotion!"

"I must go now. When you have composed yourself, come down to the Grand Parlor."

Efraim returned through the mirk-way to his chambers, and arrayed himself in formal garments.

A knock at the door. Efraim looked at the clock. Rianlle so soon?

He opened the door to find Becharab, the new First Chamberlain. "Yes, Becharab?"

"Your Force, before the castle stand several natives. They wish to speak with Your Force. I told them you are resting, but they are

insistent."

Efraim ran past Becharab, across the reception hall and foyer, to the haughty astonishment of Singhalissa who stood conversing with one of the eiodarks from Eccord.

Before the terrace stood four Fwai-chi—ancient brown-red bucks, all tatters and shags. A pair of footmen, making fastidious faces, attempted to shoo them away. The Fwai-chi, discouraged, were starting to sidle off when Efraim appeared.

He ran down the steps, motioned the footman aside. "I am Kaiark Efraim. You wished to see me?"

"Yes," said one, and Efraim thought to recognize the old buck he had met up on Whispering Ridge. "You claim that you remember no covenant in regard to the Dwan Jar."

"That is true. The Kaiark of Eccord who wants the Dwan Jar is here now."

"He must not have it; he is a man who demands much. If he were to control the Dwan Jar, he would demand more, and we would be forced to glut his avarice." The Fwai-chi produced a dusty vial containing half a gill of dark liquid. "Your memory is locked and there are no keys to the locks. Drink this liquid."

Efraim took the vial and examined it curiously. "What will it do to me?"

"Your corporeal substance itself contains memory; it is called in-

stinct. I give you a medicine. It will prompt all your cells to erupt memories—even those very cells which now block your memory. We cannot unlock the doors; but we can batter them open. Do you dare take this draught?"

"Will it kill me?"

"No."

"Will it make me insane?"

"Perhaps not."

"Will I know everything I knew before?"

"Yes. And when you have your memory, you must protect our sanctuary."

Efraim went thoughtfully up the steps.

By the balustrade Singhalissa and Destian stood waiting. Singhalissa asked sharply: "What is that vial?"

"It contains my memory. I need only drink it."

Singhalissa leaned forward, her hands quivered. Efraim moved back. She asked: "And will you drink it?"

"Naturally."

Singhalissa chewed at her lip. Efraim's vision suddenly seemed totally keen and clear; he noticed the lack of bloom on Singhalissa's skin, the minute wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, the bird-like thrust of her sternum.

"This may seem an odd point of view," said Singhalissa, "but consider: events go well for you! You are Kaiark; you are about to make trisme with a powerful realm. What else do you need? The contents of the vial may well disturb

these conditions!"

Destian spoke with an air of authority: "If I were in your position, I would let well enough alone!"

Singhalissa said: "You had best confer with Kaiark Rianlle; he is a wise man; he will advise you."

"The matter would seem to concern only myself," remarked Efraim. "I doubt if Rianlle's wisdom can apply in this case." He passed into the reception hall, to meet Rianlle coming down the grand staircase. Efraim paused. "I hope you enjoyed your rest."

Rianlle bowed politely. "Very much indeed."

Singhalissa came forward. "I have urged Efraim to solicit your advice in a very important matter. The Fwai-chi have provided him a liquid which they claim will restore his memory."

Rianlle reflected. "Excuse me a moment or two." He took Singhalissa aside; the two conversed in mutters. Rianlle nodded and thoughtfully returned to where Efraim waited.

"While I rested," said Rianlle, "I reviewed the situation which has caused a tension between our realms. I propose that we postpone further consideration of Dwan Jar. Why allow so paltry a matter to interfere with the trisme I have suggested? Am I not correct?"

"Entirely."

"However, I have no confidence in Fwai-chi drugs. Often they promote cerebral lesions. In

view of our prospective relationship I must insist that you do not dose yourself with some vile Fwai-chi potion."

Very odd, thought Efraim. If the truncation of his memory were so advantageous to other folk, then the disadvantage to himself would seem correspondingly great. "Let us join the others who await us in the parlor."

Efraim seated himself at the red table and looked around the faces: fourteen scharde and four Eccord eiodarks; Singhalissa, Destian, Sthelany; Rianlle, the Kraike Dervas, Maerio and himself. He carefully placed the vial on the table before him.

"There is a new circumstance to be considered," said Efraim. "My memory. It is contained in this bottle. At Port Mar someone robbed me of my memory. I am intensely anxious to learn the identity of this person. Of the folk who were with me in Port Mar, two are dead—by coincidence, or perhaps not coincidentally after all, both were murdered."

"I have been advised not to drink this draught. I am told that it is best to let sleeping dogs lie. Needless to say, I reject this point of view. I want my memory back, no matter what the cost." He unstoppered the vial, raised it to his mouth and poured the contents down his throat. The flavor was soft and earthy, like pounded bark and mold mixed with stump water.

He looked around the circle of faces. "You must forgive this act of ingestion before your very eyes . . . I feel nothing yet. I would expect a delay while the material permeates my blood, courses around my body . . . I notice a shifting of lights and shadows—your faces flicker. I must shut my eyes . . . I see splashes of light: they shatter and burst . . . I see everywhere in my body . . . I see with my hands and inside my legs and down my back." Efraim's voice became hoarse. "The sounds—everywhere . . ." He could speak no more; he leaned back in his chair. He felt, he saw, he heard: a jumble of impressions: whirling suns and dancing stars, the froth of salt spume, the warmth of swamp mud, the dank flavor of water-weeds. The thrust of spears, the scorch of fire and screaming women. Timelessness: visions swarmed past, then back, then away, like shoals of fish. Efraim became faint; his legs and arms went numb. He fought away the lethargy, and watched in fascination as the first furious explosion of images retreated and swirled away. The succession of sensations continued, but at a pace less blurred, as if to the control of chronology. He began to see faces and hear voices: strange faces, strange voices, of persons inexpressibly dear, and tears ran down his cheeks. He felt the extent of space; he knew the grief of departures, the exultation of conquest; he killed, he was killed; he

loved and knew love; he nurtured a thousand families; he knew a thousand deaths, a thousand infancies.

More slowly came the images, as if the source were almost drained. He was the first man to arrive on Marune; he led the tribes east from Port Mar; he was all the Kaiarks of Scharrode and of many other realms as well; he was many of the ordinary folk; he lived all these lives in the course of five seconds.

Time began to decelerate. He watched the construction of Benbuphar Strang; he prowled by mirk; he scaled the Tassenberg and struck a blond warrior toppling down the face of the Khism. He began to see faces to which he almost could put names; he was a tall auburn-haired child who grew into a tall spare man with a bony face and a short thick beard. With beating heart Efraim followed this man whose name was Jochaim through the chambers of Benbuphar Strang, by aud, isp, umber and rowan. By mirk he wandered the mirk-ways, and he felt the intoxication of striding forth, clad only in shoulder-piece, man-mask and boots into the chamber of his sometimes terrified elect. To Benbuphar Strang came the maiden Alferica from Cloudscape Castle, to be taken in trisme by Jochaim, and in due course a child was born who was named Efraim, and Jochaim faded from consciousness.

Efraim's youth passed. His

mother Alferica drowned during a visit to Eccord; presently to Benbuphar Strang came a new Kraike, Singhalissa, with her two children. One of these was dark vicious Destian; the other, a pale big-eyed waif, was Sthelany.

Tutors educated the three children; they chose cogences and eruditions. Sthelany professed the writing of poetry in an abstruse poetic language, the working of mothwing tapestry, and star-names, as well as the contriving of fumes and fragrances which all well-born ladies were expected to include among their skills. She also collected Glanzeln flower vases, glazed an ineffable transparent violet, and unicorn horns. Destian collected precious crystals, and replicas of medallions on the hilts of famous swords; he also professed heraldry and the intricate lore of fanfares. Efraim professed the architecture of castles, mineral identification, and the theory of alloys, although Singhalissa considered the choice insufficiently erudite.

Efraim politely acknowledged Singhalissa's remarks and put them to the back of his mind. He was First Kang of the Realm; Singhalissa's opinions need not concern him.

Singhalissa herself professed a dozen skills, didactics and expertises; she was quite the most erudite person of Efraim's acquaintance. Perhaps once a year she visited Port Mar, that she might buy supplies and materials for the

specialized needs of those at Benbuphar Strang. When Efraim learned that Kaiark Rianlle of Eccord, with the Kraike Dervas and the Lissolet Maerio planned to accompany Jochaim and Singhalissa to Port Mar, he decided to join the party. After considerable discussion, Destian and Sthelany also decided to undertake the journey.

Efraim had been acquainted with Maerio for years, under the formal circumstances imposed upon all visits between kaiarkal households. At first he considered her frivolous and eccentric. She lacked all erudition, she was clumsy with the vials, and she seemed always to be restraining herself from some reckless spontaneity, which caused Singhalissa's eyebrows to twitch and Sthelany to look away in ostensible boredom. These very factors induced Efraim to cultivate Maerio. Gradually he noticed that her company was extraordinarily stimulating, and that she was remarkably pleasant to look at. Forbidden thoughts wandered into his mind; he ejected them from loyalty to Maerio, who would be shocked and horrified!

The Kaiark Rianlle, Kraike Dervas and Maerio flew over the mountains to Benbuphar Strang; on the morrow all would journey to Port Mar. Rianlle, Jochaim, Efraim and Destian gathered in the Grand Parlor for an informal talk; bobbing their heads behind etiquette screens they discreetly took small cups of arrack.

Rianlle was at his best. Always a remarkable speaker, on this occasion his conversation was brilliant. Like Singhalissa, Rianlle was most erudite; he knew the Fwai-chi signals and all the trails of their 'Path through Life'; he knew the Pantechnic Metaphysic; he had collected and studied the insects of Eccord, and indited three monographs upon the subject. Additionally Rianlle was a notable warrior, with remarkable exploits to his credit. Efraim listened to him with fascination. Rianlle was discussing Dwan Jar, the Whispering Ridge. "It has occurred to me," he told Jochaim, "that here is a site of sublime beauty. One of us should make use of it. Be generous, Jochaim; let me build myself a summer garden with a pavilion on the Dwan Jar. Think how I would rest and muse to the wild whispering sound!"

Jochaim had smiled. "Impossible! Have you no sense of fitness? My eidarks would drive me forth for a madman if I agreed to your proposal. Additionally I am bound by a covenant with the Fwai-chi. Certainly you are making a joke."

"No joke whatever. Truly I covet that bit, that trifle, that insignificant wisp of land!"

Jochaim shook his head. "When I am dead, I can no longer oppose; Efraim must then assume that responsibility. While I live, I must deny you your fancy."

Rianlle said: "It would seem that by the process of dying, you withdraw your opposition. I would

not have you dead on that account, however. Let us talk along easier subjects . . ."

The group had flown into Port Mar, and as usual taken accomodation at the Royal Rhune Hotel, where the management knew and respected their customs . . .

Efraim raised his head from his hands and looked wildly around the table. Taut faces everywhere; eyes fixed upon him; silence. He closed his eyes. Recollections came soft and slow now, but with a wonderful luminous clarity. He felt himself leaving the hotel in company with Destian, Sthelany, and Maerio for a stroll through Port Mar, and perhaps a visit to the Fairy Gardens, where Galligade's Puppets provided entertainment.

They walked down the Street of Brass Boxes and across the bridge into New Town. For a few minutes they strolled along the Estrada, peering into the beer gardens where the folk of Port Mar and students from the college drank beer and devoured food in full view of everyone.

Efraim at last asked direction from a young man emerging from a book shop. Seeing the party to be Rhunes, he volunteered serving as their escort to the Fairy Gardens. To everyone's disappointment the entertainment was at an end. Their guide introduced himself as Matho Lorcas, and insisted upon ordering a bottle of wine, along with suitable etiquette screens. Sthelany raised

her eyebrows in a fashion reminiscent of Singhalissa and turned away; Efraim, catching Maerio's eye, sipped the wine, protected by the propriety of the screen. Maerio, greatly daring, did likewise.

Matho Lorcas seemed a person of buoyant disposition and irrepressible wit; he refused to allow either Sthelany or Destian to sulk. "And how are you enjoying your visit?" he asked.

"Very much," said Maerio. "But surely there is more excitement than this? We always think of Port Mar as a place of wild abandon."

"Not quite accurate. Of course this is the respectable part of town. Doesn't it seem so to you?"

"Our customs are rather different," said Destian frostily.

"So I understand, but here you are in Port Mar; why not attempt Port Mar customs?"

"That logic does not quite follow," murmured Sthelany.

Lorcas laughed. "Of course not! I wondered if you'd agree. Still—don't you have any inclination to live—well, let us say, normal lives?"

Efraim asked: "You think we don't live normal lives?"

"Not from my point of view. You're smothered in convention. You're walking bundles of neuroses."

"Peculiar," said Maerio, "I feel quite well."

"I feel well," said Efraim. "You must be mistaken."

"Aha! Well, possibly. I'd like to

visit one of the Realms and see how things go for myself. Do you like the wine? Perhaps you'd prefer punch."

Destian looked around the table. "I think we'd better return to the hotel. Haven't we seen enough of New Town?"

"Go, if you like," said Efraim. "I'm in no hurry."

"I'll wait with Efraim," said Maerio.

Matho Lorcas spoke to Sthelany. "I hope you'll wait too. Will you not?"

"Why?"

"I want to explain something which I believe you want to hear."

Sthelany languidly rose to her feet and without a word moved off. Destian, with a dubious look back at Efraim and Maerio, followed.

"A pity," said Lorcas. "I found her extremely attractive."

"Sthelany and Destian are both most stately," said Maerio.

Lorcas asked with a sly smile, "And what of you? Aren't you stately too?"

"When ceremony makes demands on me. Sometimes I find Rhune ways rather tiresome. If Efraim weren't here I'd try that punch. I'm not ashamed of my inner workings."

Efraim laughed. "Very well. If you will, I will too. But wait until Destian and Sthelany are out of sight."

Matho Lorcas ordered rum punch for all. Efraim and Maerio

drank first behind the screens, then spluttering with embarrassed laughter, brought the goblets into the open and drank.

"Bravo!" declared Lorcas soberly. "You have taken a long step on the road to emancipation."

"It doesn't amount to all that much," said Efraim. "I'll buy another round. Lorcas, what about you?"

"With pleasure. Still, it wouldn't do for the two of you to stagger into the hotel drunk, would it?"

Maerio clasped her head. "My father would turn purple. Of all the folk alive he is the most rigid."

"My father would simply look the other way," said Efraim. "He seems rigid, and of course he is, but essentially he is quite reasonable."

"So, you two are not related?"

"Not at all."

"But you're fond of each other?"

Efraim and Maerio looked sidewise at each other. Efraim laughed uncomfortably. "I won't deny it." He looked again at Maerio, whose face was twisting. "Have I offended you?"

"No."

"Then why do you look so doleful?"

"Because we must come to Port Mar to tell each other such things."

"I suppose it is absurd," said Efraim. "But Port Mar is so much different from Eccord and Schar-

rode. Here I can touch you, and it is not mirk." He took her hand.

Matho Lorcas heaved a sigh. "Ah me. I should leave you two alone. Excuse me a moment; for a fact there is someone I wish to see."

Efraim and Maerio sat together. She leaned her head against his shoulder; he bent down, kissed her forehead. "Efraim! It is not even mirk!"

"Are you angry?"

"No."

Lorcas appeared beside the table. "Your friend Destian is here."

Efraim and Maerio drew apart. Destian approached and looked curiously from one to the other. He addressed Maerio. "The Kaiark Rianlle has asked me to conduct you back to the hotel."

Efraim stared up at Destian, who, so he knew, was not above misrepresenting facts. Maerio, sensing friction, jumped to her feet. "Yes. I'll welcome some rest, and look! with umber and the overcast and the shade from these enormous trees it is almost like mirk!"

Destian and Maerio departed. With a debonair gesture Lorcas settled into the seat beside Efraim. "And that is the way things go, my friend."

"I am embarrassed," said Efraim. "What will she think of me?"

"Get her alone somewhere and find out."

"That is impossible . . . Here in

Port Mar perhaps we lost our equilibrium. In our realms we could never consider such display." He rested his chin on his hands and looked gloomily across the restaurant.

"Come along," said Lorcas. "Let's move down the avenue. I'm due at the Three Lanterns presently; first I'll show you a bit of the town."

Lorcas took Efraim to a cabaret frequented by students. They listened to music, drank light beer. Efraim explained to Lorcas how life went in the Realms. "A place like this by comparison seems a zoo of fecund animals. The Kraike Singhalissa, at least, would adopt this view."

"And you respect her judgment?"

"To the contrary; this is the principal reason I am here. I hope to discover benefits and redemptions in what I confess seems sickening behavior. Look at that couple yonder. Sweating, panting, shameless as dogs in rut. At the very least their activity is unhygienic."

"They are relaxed. Still, yonder other folk sit quite decorously, and none seem offended by the antics of the two reprobates."

"I am confused," admitted Efraim. "Trillions inhabit Alastor Cluster; not all can be deluded. Perhaps anything and everything is innocent."

"What you see here is relatively innocent," said Lorcas. "Come, I'll show you places less so. Un-

less you prefer your illusions, so to speak?"

"No. I will come with you, so long as I do not have to breathe too much fetid air."

"When you've seen enough, just say the word." He glanced at his watch. "I have just an hour to spare, then I must go to work at the Three Lanterns."

The two walked up the Street of Limping Children, then turned along the Avenue of Haune, Lorcas pointing out the more disreputable places of the town: an expensive bordello; bars frequented by sexual deviates; a dim establishment, purportedly a tea shop, which operated illegal nerve machines in the upper rooms; other sordid places offering even more questionable entertainment.

Efraim observed all with a stony face. He found himself not so much shocked as detached, as if what he saw were intended as a grotesque stage-setting. At last they reached the Three Lanterns, a rambling old structure from which issued the sound of fiddles and banjos playing merry jigs after the style of the Tisdale Wayfarers.

Singhalissa was right, thought Efraim, when she declared music no more than symbolic sebalism—well, perhaps 'sebalism' was not quite the right word. 'Passion', perhaps, which encompassed sebalism and all the other strong emotions as well. At the Three Lanterns, Lorcas took his leave of Efraim. "Remember, I'd be enchanted for the opportunity

to visit the Realms. Perhaps some day—who knows?”

Efraim, thinking of the frigid reception Lorcas would certainly receive at the hands of Singhalissa, restrained an invitation. “Perhaps some day. At the moment it might not be convenient.”

“Goodby then. Remember, directly back down the Avenue of Haune, turn south on any of the side-streets to the Estrada, and along to the bridge. Then up the Street of Brass Boxes to your hotel.”

“I am exactly oriented; I will not get lost.”

Somewhat reluctantly Lorcas went into the Three Lanterns; at the entrance he waved farewell. Efraim turned back the way they had come.

Clouds hung heavy; the time was yet umber, though very dull. Furad hung low behind Jibberee Hill, and both Maddar and Cirse were obscured by overcast. Gloom almost as dense as mirk shrouded Port Mar, and colored lights invested the Avenue of Haune with a tipsy gaiety.

As Efraim walked, his thoughts returned to Maerio; how he wished she were with him now! But futile to counter the will of the Kaiark Rianlle, whose rectitude was matched only by that of Singhalissa.

Efraim at this moment was passing the expensive bordello, and even as he reflected upon the character of the Kaiark Rianlle, out the door of the bordello, his

face blurred and clothes disheveled, stepped the Kaiark Rianlle himself.

Efraim stared, unbelievably. He began to laugh—at first incredulously, then in the intoxication of total mirth.

Rianlle stood with his mouth first open, then closed; first swelling with purple wrath, then trying to achieve a comradely grin. Under the circumstances neither could be convincing or effective. Ridicule to a Rhune was insupportable; when Efraim told the story, as surely he must—the episode was too good to keep; even Rianlle realized this—the Kaiark Rianlle would thereafter be a figure of fun, and furtive snickers would accompany him through life.

Rianlle by dint of some desperate inner contortion composed himself. “What are you doing out along the avenue?”

“Nothing! Investigating weird antics!” And Efraim again began to chuckle. Rianlle managed a steely grin. “Ah well, you mustn’t judge me too harshly. Unfortunately for myself, I am expected to represent the apotheosis of Rhune gallantry. The pressure becomes overwhelming. Come along; we will take a hot drink together as the folk do without shame here at Port Mar. The drink is called coffee and is not considered intoxicating.”

Rianlle led the way along the Street of the Clever Flea to an establishment called ‘The Great

Alastor Coffee Emporium'. He ordered the refreshment for both, then excused himself. "A moment; I have a small errand."

Efraim watched Rianlle cross the avenue and enter a dingy little shop whose windows were crowded with all manner of goods.

The coffee was served; Efraim tasted the brew and found it savory, aromatic and to his liking. Rianlle returned; the two sipped coffee in cautious silence.

Rianlle lifted the lid to the silver ewer in which the coffee was served, peered within. His hand hovered a moment over the open mouth of the ewer, then the lid dropped with a clang. He poured a second cup for Efraim, and a second cup for himself. He now became affable and expansive. Efraim drank more coffee, although Rianlle allowed his own portion to go cold. And Efraim's mind dimmed and lost itself in floating mists.

As if in a dream he felt himself walking with Rianlle along the Estrada, across the bridge and by back alleys into the park at the Royal Rhune Hotel. Rianlle approached the hotel with great stealth, but as luck would have it, the path curved, and Singhalissa stood before them.

She looked in disgust from Efraim to Rianlle. "You have found him in a state of intoxication! What shame! Jochaim will be furious!"

Rianlle considered a moment, then shook his head despondent-

ly. "Come with me, away from the path, and I will explain how things have gone."

On a secluded bench Rianlle and Singhalissa sat; Efraim stood watching a firefly. Rianlle cleared his throat. "Affairs are more serious than simple intoxication. Someone offered him a dangerous drug which he foolishly ingested; his memory has completely been destroyed."

"What a tragedy!" cried Singhalissa. "I must inform Jochaim; he will turn New Town topsyturvy, and never stop until he learns the truth!"

"Wait!" said Rianlle in a low hoarse voice. "This may not be to our best interests."

Singhalissa fixed Rianlle with a cool stare which seemed to see everything. "'Our best interests?'"

"Yes. Consider. Jochaim must ultimately die—perhaps sooner than we might wish. When that unhappy event occurs, Efraim will become Kaiark."

"In his present condition?"

"Of course not. He will rapidly become whole and alert, and Jochaim will renew his memories. But—what if Efraim goes traveling?"

"And does not return?"

"On Jochaim's death, Destian then becomes Kaiark of Scharode, and I will give him Maerio in trisme. Jochaim will never surrender Whispering Ridge; if I hold it I can levy a great toll upon the Fwai-chi; what, after all, are

gems and elixirs to them? If Destian is Kaiark there will be no difficulty."

Singhalissa reflected. "Do not underrate Destian; he is obstinate at times! But he would never deny me, were I Kraike of Eccord. In all candor, Belrod Strang is more to my taste than gloomy old Benbuphar."

Rianlle grimaced and uttered a soft involuntary moan. "What of Dervas?"

"You must dissolve the trisme; this is simple enough. If events proceed along these lines all will go well. If not, it is best that we forget the matter and I will take Efraim in to Jochaim. Never fear! Jochaim is both pertinacious and ruthless; he is fond of Efraim and will never stop until he learns all the circumstances!"

Rianlle sighed. "Destian shall be next Kaiark of Scharrode. We will then celebrate two trismes: between Destian and Maerio; between you and me."

"In that case, we will work together."

Singhalissa went off, to return with a shabby gray suit and scissors. She cut Efraim's hair short, and the two dressed him in the gray suit. Then Rianlle, stepping into his rooms, emerged wearing a black cape and a helmet which concealed his face.

Efraim's recollections blurred. He barely recalled walking to the space-port and embarkation aboard the *Berenicia*, where money changed hands between

Rianlle and the steward.

Events gradually merged into his conscious recollections. He opened his eyes to look into the face of the Kaiark Rianlle. Once again he saw the mixture of rage, shame and desperate affability Efraim had noted on the Avenue of Haune.

"My memory is whole," said Efraim. "I know the name of my enemy and I know his reasons. Cogent reasons, they are. But these are personal matters and I will deal with them on a personal basis. Meanwhile other more important affairs compel our attention."

"With the return of my memory I can now assert that the Kaiark Jochaim did indeed endorse the ancient covenant with the Fwai-chi, and that, also, he made to the Kaiark Rianlle the following remark: 'Only when I am dead will I abandon my opposition to your scheme', which the Kaiark Rianlle interpreted as 'when I am dead, there shall be no further opposition to your scheme'. A most reasonable mistake, which the Kaiark Rianlle now appreciates. I suspect that he wishes to withdraw utterly and forever his claim to the Dwan Jar; am I right, Your Force?"

"Quite correct," stated the Kaiark Rianlle in a monotone. "I see where I misinterpreted the Kaiark Jochaim's jocularly."

"Three more matters should be considered," said Efraim. "Your Force, I apply to you for trisme

between our houses and our realms."

"I am honored to accede to your proposal, if the Lissolet Maerio is like-minded."

"I agree," said Maerio.

"Temporarily I will abandon this happy subject," said Efraim, "to deal with the crime of murder."

"Murder!" The dreadful word rustled around the table.

"The Kaiark Jochaim," continued Efraim, "was murdered by a bolt in the back. The bolt was not discharged by a Gorget bore, hence the murderer is Scharde. Better to say, he accompanied the Scharde force.

"Another murder occurred during mirk. I am in a sense too close to this crime to avoid prejudice; hence you, the eiodarks of Scharode, shall hear my evidence; you shall pass judgment, and I will not quarrel with your findings.

"I speak now as a witness.

"When I arrived at Benbuphar Strang in company with my friend Matho Lorcass, I encountered the coolest of welcomes, and in fact antagonism.

"A few days before mirk the Noble Sthelany surprised me by her cordiality and her assurance that for the first time she planned not to bolt her doors during mirk." Efraim described the events previous to, during and after mirk.

"It is clear that an attempt was made to entice me into Sthelany's chambers; but poor Lorcass en-

tered in my stead, or he was recognized and murdered to prevent him from telling me of the trap.

"I well understand that strange deeds are done during mirk, but this murder falls into a different category. It was planned a week or more before mirk, and put into execution with cruel efficiency. It is not a mirk-deed. It is murder."

"The assertions are malicious fabrications," said Singhalissa. "They are too feeble to deserve refusal."

Efraim turned to Destian. "What is your comment?"

"I can only echo the Noble Singhalissa's remarks."

"And Sthelany?"

Silence. Then presently a low voice: "I will say nothing . . . Except that I am sick of life."

At this point, in embarrassment, the party from Eccord departed the Grand Parlor. The eiodarks went off to the far end of the room. For ten minutes they muttered together, then returned.

"The judgment is this," said Baron Haulk. "The three equally share guilt. They are guilty not of mirk-deed, but murder. They shall this moment be shaved bald and expelled from the Rhune Realms, carrying no property except the clothes on their backs. Forever they are exiled and no Rhune Realm will take them in. Murderers, at this moment divest yourselves of all jewels, ornaments and valuables. Then go down to the kitchens where your heads will be shaved. You will

then be escorted to the air-car and flown to Port Mar, where you must live as best you can."

Chapter 14

MAERIO AND EFRAIM stood on the parapets of Benbuphar Strang. "Suddenly," said Efraim, "we are at peace. Our difficulties have dissipated; life lies before us."

"I fear that new difficulties are just beginning."

Efraim looked at her in surprise. "How can you say so?"

"It is clear you have known life outside the Realms; I have had the merest hint of a taste. Will we

be content to live as Rhunes?"

"We can live in whatever fashion suits us," said Efraim. "I want nothing but happiness for both of us."

"Perhaps we will want to travel to far worlds. What then? How will the Schardes regard us on our return? They will consider us tainted—not true Rhunes."

Efraim looked away down the valley. "We are not Rhunes of the clearest water, for a fact. So then—what shall we do?"

"I don't know."

"I don't know either."

—JACK VANCE

To Gain A Dream (cont. from page 17)
fessional class.

Dreams you give away, but you should always give them away before they are smashed.

Too many people.

The old man hurried towards

the Utica zipway. He could be at the lab before the staff change.

Too many people.

Maybe he could change that.

—WILLIAM ROTSLER

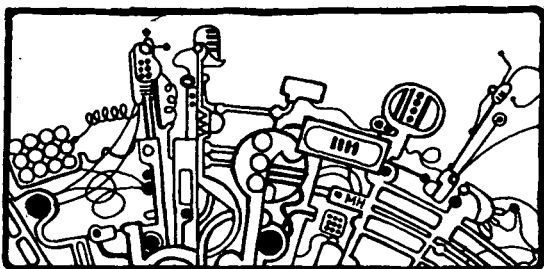
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GREG BENFORD

...in Science Fiction



Hard Lessons, Well Learned— The Exploration of Venus

MORE THAN we may realize, science fiction is a set of emblems, of metaphors. The rocket ship, the time machine—these are symbols of the journey, the quest. And always the voyage is rendered credible by the concrete underpinning of scientific fact. Without this hard basis, science fiction becomes science fantasy.

Planetary exploration has probably been the most often used device in sf. In countless stories and novels, heroes have trod the sandy slopes of Mars, peered at yellowish Jupiter, swum in the limpid pools of the Venuian jungle.

Ah, yes—what about those leafy, fragrant gardens? They were speculations, dreams, wishes. Recently I had occasion to study in detail the history of what we know about Venus, from the very beginning. There's a general feeling that sf has always been speculative and fanciful, while scientists have been cautious, conservative. It surprised me to find that in planetary exploration this contrast was simply false. All through the last few centuries, speculations about what other planets might harbor have heavily influenced scientific thinking. The dreams drove us.

To illustrate this, in what follows

I'll cover in detail the exploration of just one body—Venus. More than any other planet, this one has, mirror-like, reflected back toward us our own ideas, our own preconceptions.

I. A Glimmering Promise

AT SUNSET it beckons brightly on the far horizon, more brilliant than any star. The dot of light appears at the margins of the day, rising or setting more than three hours before or after the sun. In early morning it is so bright the Greeks named it Phosphorus. They knew it as a planet, a wanderer in the sky. There are references in Greek literature to its alabaster light, compared to the white skin of a beautiful woman. Perhaps this is why Venus was always associated with the Goddess of Love.

History is full of ironies. Ancient shepherds watching the mottled pink and brown face of Mars connected it with blood and war. Yet Venus, serene and unchanging, is a far more hostile place. How we discovered this inversion of appearances and reality is a fascinating detective story, one that is still going on.

Men have squinted at the unblemished disc of Venus for centuries

without learning very much. Galileo saw that the planet shows phases just as our moon does—this was a crucial point against the earth-centered theory of the solar system. It also explained why Venus is not much brighter when it is nearest the Earth, for then we see it only as a thin crescent. The planet rides about the Sun in a nearly perfectly circular orbit, unescorted by any moons. In the seventeenth century the Dutch physicist Huygens studied Venus for years and remarked "... she always appeared to me all-over equally lucid, that I can't say I observed so much as one Spot in her . . . is not all that Light we see reflected from An atmosphere surrounding Venus?"

It was an inviting speculation. Judging from its apparent size, the planet was slightly smaller than Earth. Its slight perturbing influence on the other planets led astronomers to conclude that it had about 0.81 of Earth's mass. There was no way to tell how deep the atmosphere was, but reasoning by analogy with the Earth, astronomers estimated that at the surface the acceleration of gravity was about 88% of ours.

On the face of it, these numbers make Venus seem the most Earth-like of all the planets. Mars and Mercury are substantially smaller, and the outer gas giant planets are huge. Clouds seemed a very Earth-like feature; Mars has very few, and our planet is approximately half covered by clouds at any one moment. The fact that Venus was totally shrouded in a yellowish-white blanket might indicate that there were some substantial differences between Earth and Venus, but the similar sizes and masses suggested the differences needn't be dramatic.

Our white billowy clouds are

mostly water. It was natural to think that Venus was a wetter world than ours, cloaked in perpetual rainstorms. The Swedish chemist Arrhenius, a Nobel Prize winner, speculated in 1918 that "everything on Venus is dripping wet . . . a very great part of the surface of Venus is no doubt covered with swamps. . . constantly uniform climatic conditions which exist everywhere result in an entire absence of adaptation to changing exterior conditions. Only low forms of life are therefore represented, mostly, no doubt, belonging to the vegetable kingdom; and the organisms are nearly of the same kind all over the planet." With this recommendation by a world-famous scientist, the Venus-as-tropical-resort picture became popular. Some traces of the earlier Venus-as-Love-Goddess ideas remained, causing some to attribute the life forms beneath the clouds with benign, peaceful intentions. Without ever giving concrete reasons, popular articles assumed the intelligent inhabitants of our sister planet would never display the aggression of the Martians in Wells' *The War of the Worlds*. It was easy to assume the Venusians would copy our own best attributes, right down to the bicameral legislature and popular charities.

All this, without knowing how long the Venus day was, the surface temperature, or what the clouds were. In the 1920s several attempts to measure water vapor in the clouds failed to detect any. This led to the Venus-as-desert model, identifying the clouds with huge dust storms stirred up by high winds at the surface. The apparent absence of water freed speculation in other directions, too—some astronomers calculated that the surface might have thick oily oceans of hydrocarbons and the clouds re-

sembled smog. But in the absence of any further data, virtually any guess was as good as another. "It's embarrassing," a prominent astronomer commented in the late 1940s. "The closest planet to us—but we know less about it than we do about Jupiter, a world much further away. It may be like the Bahamas, or it could be sudden death if we stood on its surface. We just don't know. We can see it very clearly, but that white mask doesn't tell us a thing."

Whatever the clouds were, their lemon-yellow color meant that something in them absorbed blue light preferentially. Over 85% of the sunlight falling on Venus is reflected. For life-on-Venus advocates this was a hopeful result. Venus orbits 26,000,000 miles closer to the sun than Earth, so it would be a hotter place unless it could get rid of most of the incoming sunlight. By reflecting 85%, a simple calculation showed that Venus could have temperatures more or less like those on the surface of Earth. Of course, this is an estimate of the temperature at the top of the clouds, miles above the Venusian surface. The best calculated value (-47°C) agreed quite well with direct measurements of the infrared light from the clouds (-43°C).

This cool temperature for the upper clouds helped explain why earlier studies of the spectrum of Venus had found no water. Water vapor is easy to detect, but ice is not. Ice crystals in the cool cloud tops would escape observation, but carbon dioxide gas—which freezes only at a much lower temperature—would show up easily. The abundance of carbon dioxide seemed to argue against a Venus rich in life, because plant materials, animal bones and shells tend to absorb this gas from the at-

mosphere. But if water was present in the high ice clouds, it might also appear lower in the atmosphere. Where there is water, there could well be life. But the crucial remaining question was, how warm was Venus? The -43°C reading near the top of the clouds was reassuringly close to earth-like conditions, so things seemed hopeful. All this changed in 1956.

II. The Temperature Riddle

EVERY OBJECT gives off electromagnetic waves. The precise mixture of the wave lengths depends on how hot it is. If a body is very hot, some of its radiation appears in the visible spectrum; we use this in everyday life to judge how hot a flame might be.

Planets are warmed by the sun and radiate away most of this energy in the infra-red part of the spectrum. Many gases absorb infra-red quite effectively, though, so the direct radiation from the surface of Venus was probably absorbed in the clouds. Whatever infra-red waves we measured from the planet probably indicated conditions near the top of the atmosphere. To look further requires studying a different wave length of radiation. An obvious candidate is radio waves; the hotter, a body the more it emits in the radio spectrum.

A group led by Cornell Mayer measured radio wave length emission from Venus in 1956, using a 50ft. parabolic antenna. The waves they measured were 3 centimeters in wave length, and the signal stood out plainly above the noise background. The Mayer group waited until Venus was at its closest approach to the earth, in order to get the strongest signal from the planet. The amount of radiation could be directly related to the temperature of whatever was

emitting the waves.

Almost incredibly—and contrary to nearly everyone's expectations—the temperature was almost 330°C. What's more, there seemed to be little temperature difference between the dark and sunlit sides of Venus.

There were further puzzles. The 330°C temperature appeared in emissions with centimeter wave lengths. Smaller wave lengths, in the millimeter range, gave a sharp decline in temperature. These waves indicated a temperature around 40°C. The easiest way to explain these differences was to assume that some of the radiation was being absorbed in the atmosphere. The simplest assumption was that the centimeter radiation came from the hot surface. If carbon dioxide was absorbing some of this radiation, the millimeter waves should originate at least eleven miles above the surface. The infra-red, which gave low temperatures, had to come from clouds at least 21 miles above the hot surface. This was a very deep atmosphere. It was quite a forbidding environment for life, as well, and several astronomers sought out alternate theories that could explain the data.

The crucial assumption of the hot surface model, described above, is that the centimeter radiation comes from the surface. Once this is admitted, the rest follows necessarily. Other models were possible, and they were pursued in the late 1950s. The question excited great interest because the quickly advancing space program promised further detailed measurements of Venus in the near future. Theories could be tested.

There are many things other than the surfaces of planets which emit great quantities of radio waves. Charged particles trapped in earth's

magnetic fields do. Lightning flashes between clouds in our own atmosphere give considerable radio interference. Charged particles in the dense upper atmosphere of Venus could, conceivably, radiate strongly in the radio spectrum. All these ideas were pursued with energy.

If the ionized layer in the upper part of the atmosphere of Venus (the ionosphere) was responsible for the radio waves, an alternate model followed naturally. A hot, dense ionosphere would be transparent to shorter (millimeter) waves. These millimeter waves could come directly from the surface, which was about 50 to 100°C. Then the infra-red radiation came from cool clouds above the surface, yet below the ionosphere. Thus Venus could be relatively mild at its surface, and perhaps even cool enough for liquid water to form.

This hot ionosphere model seemed reasonable, and in fact relied on radio emission properties we knew worked in the Van Allen belts around Earth and Jupiter. But in several details the hot ionosphere model seemed shaky. Radar telescopes began probing Venus in the early 1960s, and found several details of the hot ionosphere model were not borne out. However, it was always possible to get around these objections with a somewhat more complicated and ingenious model. It seemed that the question could not be settled by a few simple measurements made from Earth, combined with elaborate theories. The stage was set in 1962 for a conclusive experiment which could only be carried out from a spacecraft passing near Venus.

The clearest experiment which could differentiate between the hot surface and the hot-ionosphere models involved a small radio telescope. If

it was close to Venus, this radio telescope could easily discern emission from the center of the disc of Venus, versus that emitted at the edge. This was important, because the hot ionosphere model meant most radio emission (around one centimeter wavelength) should come from a layer miles above the surface of Venus. When the radio telescope looked at the very edge of the planetary disc, it should see a greater thickness of ionosphere, with less emission from the atmosphere below that layer. This meant the radio telescope should register more radio emission from the *edge* of the disc than from the center.

The picture was just the opposite if the hot surface model was true. One centimeter radiation is weakly absorbed by carbon dioxide gas. Looking toward the edge of the planetary disc, the radio telescope would see more absorbing carbon dioxide than when it pointed toward the *center* of the disc. Thus there should be more radio emission from the center of the planet than from the edges. This is called *lim-darkening*. If the hot ionosphere model were correct, the edge (lim) of Venus should be brighter at radio wavelengths.

It was impossible to do this experiment from Earth. Even large radio telescopes could not scan across the disc of Venus and distinguish the lim from the body. But a small radio telescope near Venus could do the job. Astronomy could go no further without a direct measurement from a spacecraft.

III. First Step Outward

IN THE sophisticated 1970s it is hard to remember how much excitement accompanied the launch of an unmanned lunar or planetary probe in the

early days of the space program. The first attempt to send a man-made object to the vicinity of another planet came in 1961, from the Soviet Union. Since the launching of the first Sputnik it was obvious that the USSR had much larger rocket booster systems than the United States. Therefore, they could launch immense vehicles of relatively little sophistication and great ruggedness. The United States had to rely on small satellites and planetary probes, expensively engineered to do the best possible job with the lightest, most durable electronics.

The competition between the US and the USSR, each with different strengths and weaknesses, dominated the early days of the space program. The Soviet Union tried virtually every "launch window" which came with each close approach to a nearby planet.

The military interests in the Soviet Union apparently decided early on to attempt the more spectacular coup. Consequently, by the end of 1972 five USSR capsules had entered the Venus atmosphere. Similarly, there have been three Soviet landings on Mars.

The first flight toward Venus came in February, 1961, from the USSR. In mid-flight the Soviets lost contact with their probe, the Venera I. They enlisted the help of the English Jodrell Bank radio telescope and tried to regain contact. These attempts failed and Venera I was never heard from again.

The United States followed soon after, on December 14, 1962. The launch was successful and soon after, Mariner II set out on its 182-million-mile arc toward Venus. It unfurled winglike solar panels to draw power. Its older brother, Mariner I, had gone off course during launch

from Cape Canaveral, Florida, and was deliberately destroyed. Mariner II had to be assembled on only a ten month schedule, meaning that the probe was a half-breed with earlier Ranger probes designed for exploration of the Moon.

Sending a probe from one orbiting planet to another is more complicated than simply firing it in a straight line. When an orbiting object slows down, the sun's gravitational pull draws it inward. So, to leave Earth's orbit and move inward toward Venus, Mariner first was fired opposite to the direction of Earth's orbital speed. This reduced Mariner's speed and caused it to slowly follow an ellipse inward toward Venus. Every planetary flight requires remarkable marksmanship. Launching a rocket from the surface of the Earth, and then making mid-course corrections during the flight, is a delicate task. It has been compared to sitting on a merry-go-round and shooting a bullet to hit a fast-flying sparrow over the horizon.

On its long 182 million mile flight, Mariner made several measurements of the interplanetary medium, including a study of the fine spray of particles thrown out by the sun. Part way through the flight something struck the craft at the speed of a bullet. Mariner shuddered, lost its sighting on the sun, and then regained it a few minutes later. Whatever struck it was a meteorite weighing between a 20th and a 50th of a pound and moving at 1,600 ft. per second. The craft was barely engineered to withstand such an impact, but it did.

As the craft neared Venus, the sun swelled a third in size. Venus showed a narrowing crescent and then, as the craft passed by, a dazzling white disc. Mariner's flight path curved slightly, tugged by the mass of Shakespeare's

"full star that ushers in the even."

For days before the fly-by, Mariner had been running a temperature. The battery aboard ran as high as 129°F, far above the level at which it had been tested. At several points Mariner failed to turn on its instruments, as it was programmed to. The probe activated again, though, under command from the radio telescope in Goldstone, California.

Though Earth was the third brightest object in Mariner's sky as it neared Venus, the instruments on board ignored our blue-green dot. The radio telescope mounted above the center of Mariner's spidery body nodded three times as the probe arced around Venus. It took a series of measurements on the night side, a sweep across the dawn line and a further scan across the dayside disc. This allowed a careful study of the planet's lim and a check to see if the edge of the planet was brighter in the radio wavelengths.

When Mariner chattered its digital message back to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, the hot surface advocates carried the day. There was a distinct darkening at the edge of the Venus disc, indicating that radio waves came primarily directly from the surface. Venus was a cauldron.

Magnetic field probes also showed that Venus differs strongly from the Earth, which has belts of trapped energetic particles caught in the earth's magnetic field. Venus has less than 100,000th the magnetic field strength of Earth.

The absence of any appreciable magnetic field was itself a mystery. We believe the Earth's field comes from currents driven in the highly conducting metallic core. The Earth's center is squeezed by the matter

above it, and heated by the decay of radio-active elements. Our 24 hour rotation period churns currents in this core and produces a magnetic field. Since Venus is only slightly smaller than Earth, it seemed in the early 1960s that it should have a magnetic field, since it probably had a core. But even with a core, if the planet did not spin rapidly the electrical currents would be small. This appears to be the case, for other lines of evidence have told us that the day on Venus is very long.

Even Mariner, at close range, could tell us nothing about the length of the Venus day. All that we know about it comes instead from radar. When a pulse of radar strikes a planet, it is reflected in much the same way as a polished ball reflects light. If the surface of the planet is moving, the radiation returned to the radar antenna is altered. If a portion of the planet's surface is moving toward the radar antenna, the frequency of the pulse that returns will be slightly higher. If the part of the planet is moving away from the radar antenna, the reflected radar pulse returns with slightly lower frequency. If the planet is spinning, one side is moving away from Earth and the other toward the Earth. Thus a slight up and down shift in the frequency of the radar signal can tell us how rapidly Venus is rotating. Because Venus hides behind its veil of atmosphere, this is the only way we can measure the length of its day.

Measurements in 1961 established that the rotation was slow, but no more than that. By the time Mariner II was on its flight, the Goldstone facility had improved its sensitivity enough to find out in which direction Venus was rotating. Surprisingly, it is rotating backwards.

On Earth, if we were to stand at

the North Pole and watch the planet turn beneath us, objects would rotate in a counter-clockwise direction. The Earth revolves around the sun in the same manner, also counter-clockwise. Standing on the North Pole of Venus would give the opposite effect—surface features would appear to move clockwise. This is called retrograde rotation. Of all the planets in the solar system, only Venus and Uranus have this property. It is still not understood.

Even more mystifying, the Venus day was shown by radar measurements to be 243.16 Earth days. This is so unlike both Earth and Mars that it raises questions immediately. A clue may lie in the fact that this 243 Earth day rotation period makes Venus present exactly the same face to Earth whenever it is closest to us. How Venus got this way is probably tied up with conditions at the origin of the solar system, and it may also involve a peculiar relationship between Venus and Earth. The fact that these two planets perform an elaborate waltz, with Venus always turning the same face toward us as it draws nearby, means that Earth probably has exerted considerable tidal influence on Venus, just as it does on our Moon.

Tidal forces operate effectively if there is a bulge in a planet. It is possible that Venus has a lump in its equatorial plane, which allows Earth to exert a considerable tug on it when the two planets are near each other. It has also been suggested that Earth's tides pull at the heavy Venus atmosphere. Over billions of years this interaction may have slowed Venus. There are other ideas—that Venus once collided with an asteroid about 200 kilometers in diameter, a catastrophic event that could have re-

versed the planet's rotation. The problem remains open.

Radar measurements used in conjunction with optical observations led to a measurement of the depth of the Venus atmosphere. It is thick, between 27 and 40 miles deep (44 to 65 kilometers). This thick blanket of carbon dioxide means that although the planet's day is long, the night is not chilly. Instead, heated gas from the day side quickly blows around to the night side. This is why measurements of the night side of Venus have given temperatures just as high as on the day side.

Mariner II gave good indirect evidence that Venus was so incredibly hot at the surface that lead itself would melt. But the evidence was indirect, and some felt it was not conclusive. This led the Soviet Union to make an attempt at an actual entry into the Venus atmosphere. Their Venera III probe in 1965 did impact with the atmosphere, but something failed in the probe and no data was returned. The USSR decided to try again.

IV. Into the Cauldron

IN 1967 MARINER V flew by Venus and the Soviet Venera IV dropped a capsule. The small, rugged brown ball deployed a parachute and sank slowly through the upper cloud decks. Part way down, the craft stopped transmitting. The Russian scientists interpreted this as an impact with the surface. But the reported temperature (about 280°C) and the surface pressure of twenty times Earth normal disagreed with interpretations of the Mariner II data.

This point came to a head at a 1968 meeting in Tokyo. Faced with data from Mariner V and Mariner II, and

some convincing arguments framed by the Americans, the Soviets argued that Venera IV had landed atop a high mountain. This meant, though, that the craft happened to set down on a 15-mile-high mountain. At the same time, radar studies showed no mountain on Venus higher than a mile. This seemed too much a long shot. Carl Sagan reports that a Russian professor replied to these comments by asking what Sagan thought the probability was that the first German bomb to fall on Leningrad in World War II would kill the sole elephant in the city. Sagan responded that the chance was small. The professor chuckled and pointed out that in fact that was precisely what happened. The elephant was the first casualty in the Leningrad zoo. So huge coincidences do occur.

Elephants aside, it seemed more likely that Venera IV had simply collapsed under the enormous pressure. The Soviet designers of Venera IV believed the implications of the hot ionosphere model, which indicated the atmospheric pressure near the surface should not be terribly high.

The USSR designed a following craft, Venera VII, to withstand pressures 180 times that at the surface of Earth. In December of 1970 it parachuted to the parched, rocky surface and sent back radio signals twenty minutes before it was fried. The atmospheric pressure is 70 times Earth's. Temperatures reach 350°C. Brisk winds whip around the planet, carrying heat from the day side to the night.

The dust carrying winds within a thick, hot atmosphere should erode the surface much more powerfully than our air could. This is probably why sensitive radar measurements of the geography of Venus have shown

that height variations are far less pronounced on Venus than they are on Mars.

These measurements are made using the echo time delay of a given radar pulse. Abrupt changes in the slope of the ground show up best in this work, so that mountain ranges stand out far better than slow overall changes in the slope. Venus seems to be a grainy place, perhaps like a jumbled desert. Dust storms should occur often and dust may be blown into the upper reaches of the atmosphere. This could account for some of the optical properties and yellowish-blue tinge of the upper clouds.

Between 1965 and 1972 the Soviet Union attempted a total of ten landings on Venus. Four entered the atmosphere and two reached the surface. The latest was Venera VIII, a special design which made some geological experiments. Venera VIII was encased in a descent module which dropped from orbit. The module fired braking rockets and was also slowed by atmospheric friction, sending the temperature of the shell to over 12,000°. Descent by parachute took about an hour. A small port opened in the side of the round craft, admitting atmospheric gases. This was an experiment to measure ammonia concentrations. A fine grain yellow powder was exposed to the atmosphere and turned blue; the color change was registered by a simple light-sensitive circuit. This test showed that there was at least 100th of 1% ammonia in the lower reaches of the Venus atmosphere. Similar tests found the atmosphere contained 97% carbon dioxide, not more than 2% nitrogen, less than 0.1% oxygen, and less than 1% water vapor just beneath the cloud layer. Venera VIII landed softly amid loose granite rock.

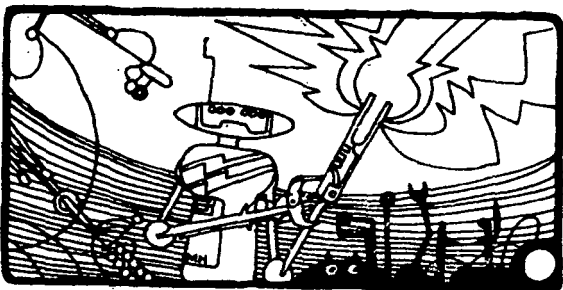
It survived the intense 470°C temperature for fifty minutes. It was designed to do this—the components had been frozen while the craft was still in orbit, so that it could survive longer on the surface. Venera III touched down on the sunward side on the planet, but before the sun had risen over the horizon. A small light sensitive device registered a kind of dim twilight, showing that even Venus' thick cloud blanket does not filter out all sunlight.

Not that sunlight is necessary to see things there. Under such intense heat, in the shadows of the low hills, rocks probably can be seen glowing by their own heat. The carbon dioxide is so dense that it bends light rays around the planet, like a lens. The bending also spreads an image, so on the night side the sun would appear as a rainbow smear on the distant horizon. This refraction of light is strong because the atmosphere is so dense. In the murky daylight the refraction of distant objects will be so severe that the horizon will seem to curve upward away from an observer. He will seem to be at the bottom of a pit which remains centered on him no matter where he moves.

This is a bleak, tortured picture, but not one without interest. Even with an atmosphere ninety times more dense than Earth's, Venus apparently cannot shield its surface from large meteorite impact. At least, that is a preliminary conclusion from detailed radar studies done by Richard Goldstein and collaborators at the Goldstone Deep Space Station in the Mojave Desert. He scanned the equatorial region of Venus and was able to resolve a 910-mile circular swath, about the size of Alaska, pitted with a dozen huge, shallow craters. The largest is 160 kilometers across

(cont. on page 128)

...OR SO YOU SAY



Letters intended for publication should be typed, double-spaced, on one side of each sheet, and addressed to Or So You Say, Box 409, Falls Church, Va., 22046

Dear Ted,

It's been nearly three years since I've written to comment concerning your excellent stf magazines. It's been the same amount of time since I've read them. During the last three weeks I've concentrated my efforts to remedy that situation. I just caught up in the last few minutes by finishing the May **AMAZING**. It was simply . . . er . . . ah . . . amazing!

Actually, I'm quite amazed that you haven't been able to place first as professional editor. Your longer fiction has been very, very good. I especially enjoyed the Jack Vance novels. He really has a talent in making alien landscapes and social systems intriguing and at the same time very logically constructed. I look forward to *Marune Alastor*: 933 with a great deal of anticipation.

As for the shorter fiction you've used, I'm very glad to see so many fine fans breaking into the professional ranks. Alpajpuri's work is quite interesting. He uses the suicide motif in an eerie, undefined way I especially admire. His work shows great empathy, although he needs to polish

his style for more lucidity and conciseness.

I could go off on a tangent now in order to tell you what I've been doing all this time instead of reading stf, but such thoughts would better be expressed personally through the medium of the fanzine or in person at a convention. Though I'm on the verge of complete pennilessness I hope to make this year's Disclave. Suffice to say, I have a lot of catching up to do, but I look forward to another period of hyperactivity for myself and a new faannish era to be a member of—if only as a letterhack again.

I'm sorry now that I didn't read the last three years of your magazines as they were published. I could've written a lot of letters concerning some of the best work you've accepted. The writers deserve the egoboo. In any case, the May issue was very good.

Your story based on the pleasing illo by Mike Nally was carefully constructed. The alien race was sympathetically made real to me. Zyd's dilemma created a much more human character out of him than many stories which play a variation on the theme of earthman's burden. Although the ending of the story seems rather final, I'd like to see a sequel based on the aftermath of the rebellion. Zyd's too fine a creation to be

buried in only one novelet.

George Martin's offering provoked a lot of thought. His view of the near future US is all too convincing. I fear that any sort of leftist revolt such as he described could only meet with the fierce opposition he envisioned. Just how far could a militant uprising by the progressive elements of our culture go? I don't know. I only hope I'm never called upon to find out. However, I realize if worse came to worse I'd join the Alfies so I could at least defend myself from whatever secret police the rulers unleash.

The demands of the Alfies I applaud. However, I don't go along with the unilateral disarmament clause. I'd rather fight to outwit homegrown fascists rather than some imported totalitarians. Unfortunately, we operate in a world where eternal vigilance is indeed the price of liberty. That's sad. But it's the price we must pay. If we turn our backs the next Nixon waiting in the wings is sure to take that as his cue.

Martin's story brings up an all too familiar scenario to mind. Years ago some friends and I decided that the rightwing would probably come to power in this country in the aftermath of an ignoble defeat in Southeast Asia and an economic slump at home. We agreed, however, that Nixon and his ilk—who are phony opportunists that are not true believers of the Wallace or John Birch stripe—would co-opt the extremist grumblings for their own greedy enrichment. Well, it happened, but Nixon was such an inept bungler that he got caught in the act. So, where do all the uptight conservatives go? Ronald Reagan and George Wallace seem to have decided they are where purity, apple pie and chevy are headed. Considering the size of the crowds they've been drawing I

feel like this is more than the paranoid ruminations of a tired young radical. But then, they are better than an outright military takeover. At least they pretend to abide by the Constitution which may leave just enough daylight for tyranny to be avoided. But as I said, I'm tired. I've been in too many protests in my life to feel anything but a bone-wracking weariness. Maybe I should retire to Vesco-land where the livin' is easy.

Brian Stableford is really talented. "The Engineer and the Executioner" is just more proof of this. I liked his articles about the sociological implications of stf also. Since I may soon be working on a master's degree in the field of deviant behavior I suppose he wouldn't mind if I used his thesis for the basis of a concentrated study. After all, stf fans are looked upon as deviant by so many people that a study which purported to investigate the reasons for this ostracism might have some effect toward liberating us from the self-consciousness that I'm sure most fans have felt from time to time due to the misconceptions of the masses.

Brian Stableford has done a great service in showing how stf need not be defended on literary grounds alone. In fact, his social hypothesis might develop into a demonstrable model with heuristic implications. In fact, I'd like to do research along those lines if I could get the level of co-operation I need from other fans. However, I've known too many dewy-eyed neofans who went to the Con to have the assembled kindred spirits fill out their questionnaires only to discover no fan would answer the provided forms in a serious manner. I can understand why. Who wants to do that at a Con? I'd rather be getting high or balling a chick or meeting

someone I'd known only through the mail or . . . Anyway, it's easy to see why such an approach failed. But there are alternatives to the sampling device of the questionnaire which, although not as statistically valid, are better indicators of the subjective fish-bowl of the world of the stf fan.

Rachel Cosgrove Payes' tale was novel. A fresh approach like hers is needed more often. Most importantly, the protagonist and his rival came alive as real people. Too often stf stories have had plots filled with action, scenes of lush paradise and striking concepts in a story-world denuded of human habitation. Characterization just doesn't exist in too many stf offerings! Some of the best loved writers of the genre have trouble making their heroes and heroines seem real. Rachel certainly has no problem in that case. She makes me want more. New writers take heed, her ending might have been just another gimmick if it hadn't been for her sensitive portrait of a young man trying to attain social mobility in a caste-like hereditary milieu.

The short stories were also entertaining, although an extremely varied lot. Zebrowski's tale of "The Cliometricon" was my favorite. Now there's a concept which could easily produce a series of hard science novels. It has infinite possibilities limited only by the courage with which he follows the dictates of his imagination. Ah! for the sake of the unbounded imagination . . .

Gerard's violent story didn't offend me in the least. However I enjoy sex and drugs a lot more than violence *per se*. If his hero had been able to relate at all to other people as humans I might have found more in the tale than a cheap thrill. I've always fantasized going beserk some day with an

AK-47, grenades and a dune buggy at my disposal. However, I'd never do anything of the sort except inside my head. I suppose many people have this fantasy in some form, if they'd only admit it. The tale was purgative in the sense it showed the ultimate futility of such a beserker rage. No matter how much psychological release such a mass murderer might have through his actions he would eventually be brought down in a hail of bullets himself.

Susan Wood, I love you. Indeed, you've always impressed me as one of the best heads in the fan world. I've enjoyed your conversation at numerous cons in the remote past—several years is eons in the fan world as we all well know—which was always filled with the kind of conciseness you exhibit in your work for *The Clubhouse*. So far, I think your ability has made the fanzine review scene in AMAZING the best it has ever been. That's not too easy when you consider who you follow. John Berry did a fine job too. However, Ed Smith wasn't around long enough for me to decide whether he was that great. But I liked his work for what it was worth. But in any case, I hope to start a new personalzine of my own soon which I shall entitle *Hoagie*—a nickname I acquired at college due to my prodigious consumption of the aforementioned submarine when I was royally stoned.

Ted, I'm using "stf" in this loc primarily on your suggestion. I like the sound of it. Also, in an age when journalists don't like to call the Mafia the Mafia, I think it only fitting that the stf community adopt a title without the perjorative connotations of sci-fi.

Your deeper discussion of what ethical value stf authors should incul-

cate, if any, is crucial. Philosophers debate such topics endlessly. That is, traditional metaphysicians do. Today, the epistemological question of how rather than why has permeated the speculations of such thinkers. Y'see, all power to the hower. Despite the irreverence of that comment, I regret the emphasis on how do we know something because no one can really say. So, the prior question is unanswerable in an absolute sense. Therefore, few have followed in the footsteps of such system-builders as Kant and Hegel although their contributions to the field of ethics has been considerable. Whitehead's process philosophy has been a crucial modern attempt to mediate the wide gulf between skepticism and dogmatism. It too fails in important respects. But the effort is more than those who have analyzed symbols to death for the past fifty years. Sometimes I wish I'd never heard of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. But at least we know that philosophical problems are merely due to confusions over the "real" meanings of word-symbols. Or do we? Sometimes I think we should all just call ourselves existentialists and go fishing . . .

As for your letter col, I'm glad Hubert Dixon said what he did about firearms. The government has me listed as a conscientious objector, but I'm really no pacifist. I really think that gun education classes would fail as miserably as sex or drug education seems to have. No amount of education will prevent an idiot from blowing off his big toe, or contracting VD or passing out on downs. Hopefully, the fools won't infect the rest of us. I'm fond of my big toe. Somehow it keeps my perspective on life evenly balanced.

Oh, an aside to Wayne Martin who

speculated on my burial in the November FANTASTIC. Yes, the bug-gers tried hard. Ten tentacted slime sluts with bulbous learing visages grafted with me insanely. Their superhuman strength and determination slowly but surely forced me back and back and back. I fell over my mother's potted geraniums into a putrid cesspool awash with obscene, half-seen phantoms of the most horrible aspect. I screamed in terrible agony as they ravaged my poor body with every devilish device as their disposal. I was utterly humiliated as the fiends forced me to write a poem to their lust-goddess Rowena. She frothed and gibbered fiendishly as I was forced to have unspeakable intimate relations with her. They would not allow me to escape until I promised under the threat of eternal enslavement as Rowena's bondage-lover to send this very poem to Ted White in my first loc. So in closing—therein is the very words I wrote to save my bruised and abused body from more terrors:

*Words Wasted Upon the
Water, Written Knee Deep*

Underground a sacred stream wanders
Midst misty caverns lost in a hazy dream
Much like my unloved love slumbers
In a lazy clime of no fast time

Oh, if only she would answer my heart
As the silent sea knows sounds and shapes
To sadly sing the light thread of sunshine
Across her mute surface in the mid-winter twilight

Yes, a cold, cold half-light cast upon
the secret spring
Of my numb desire illumines unfilled
happy hopes
Whose empty bed instead inhabits
the cob-webbed halls
Of a dead dwarf king who kills the
nightengale

Countless corpses bled his sighs
Reliving dank, dark pools
Awash with bloody tyrant toil in chain
Bound to rock which speak unspoken

In the hushed still of morning's first
delight
I seize the dawn like one never set
free,
A prisoner of styled fashion, wild pas-
sion
Doomed not to pass go, pause or pre-
vail

Yet St. Paul plans to tell them all I've
gone
To hell and won't be back until she
plays toot toot
On her flute which is choo choo to
the train
They'll send to bring me home
again—cha cha cha

Then that day I'll be blown away just
like:
A rainbow red with the rose-fed—
A shadow half-suspended on that
which is splendid—
A happy puppy caress with hot breath
blest—
A Grateful Dead tune never-ending
too soon

Alack, alas this sounds so much like an
ode
Composed on a commode: Ode
Ode Ode
While is why it is aptly entitled
Words wasted upon the water, writ-

ten knee deep

DAVE HULVEY
Rt. 1, Box 198
Harrisonburg, Va., 22801

*Your return to these pages, Dave, cer-
tainly marks the beginning of a new
epoch in the annals of stf letterhacks.
As for Zyd (of "Under The Mad
Sun"), I suspect you're right: he
shows a marked inclination to be fea-
tured in another story. When I'll have
an opportunity to write it, however,
is an open question. If you think
Michael Girard's protagonist was a
mass-murderer you didn't read his
story closely enough . . . every one of
those people upon whom he bestowed
such violence was already dead—and
that was the point of his going beserk.
I thought that point was summed up
explicitly in his concluding three
paragraphs, but to judge from some of
the letters I've received—you were not
alone in missing it—it was subtle
enough to slip right by many readers.
As for your poem, about all I can say
is that I hope the slime sluts leave you
alone from now on. . . —TW*

Dear Mr. White:

I like the way George R.R. Martin
writes. I liked "With Morning Comes
Mistfall," and I loved "Run to Star-
light." Which is, I suppose, why I
was so disappointed by "Night of the
Vampyres."

In writing this story, Martin had
the opportunity to say something
meaningful. Given the basic situation,
he could choose to write either a
story about whitehat Revolutionaries
oppressed by a blackhat Establish-
ment, or about a vicious struggle for
power between two Fascistic factions.
And even at the end, he never makes
it explicit which he's done. He never
says that the government staged the
whole thing; he leaves it open for the

AMAZING

reader to think about for himself.

Now, who's kidding whom? I assume it was his intent to allow the full horror of the government's sinister machinations to dawn on the reader slowly and terribly. If that was his intent, he failed. It was obvious from paragraph five that the whole thing would turn out to be a put-up job.

I know that with things the way they are, it will take a little while before we've worked our way through the fad of Nixon stories. As far as I'm concerned, the sooner this fad has run its course, the better.

STEPHEN A. ANTELL
45 Pineapple St., Apt. 4A
Brooklyn, N.Y. 11201

Dear Ted:

This loc is in response to Gordon Eklund's enjoyable piece in the latest edition (March 75) of AMAZING. My comments are as follows:

10 or twenty years ago, this type of story was in style. That is, during the tail end of the Golden Age. I wish that it was more popular now. If I was not aware of Mr. Eklund's relatively recent indoctrination into sf writing, I would venture to guess that this story was one that he tried to sell about 25 years ago. Indeed, such a Golden Age story is more at home in one of your reprint magazines.

But, since I am in favor of a Return of the Golden Age type of writing, this story made quite a milestone in the March issue. Not another story topped it. And Mr. Eklund seems destined for quite his share of success, or more so.

SCOTT C. SMITH
10418 Hayvenhurst Avenue
Granada Hills, CA., 91344

Dear Ted:

There's been a lot of response to

my letter in the October '74 number about top authors. The results follow:

1. Isaac Asimov (*aargh!!*)
2. Robert A. Heinlein
3. Arthur C. Clarke
4. Larry Niven
5. Ursula K. LeGuin
6. Poul Anderson
7. Harlan Ellison
8. A. E. Van Vogt
9. Robert Silverberg
10. Ray Bradbury
11. Jack Vance
12. Roger Zelazny
13. Robert Sheckley
14. Fritz Leiber
15. Andre Norton
16. Philip Jose Farmer
17. Gordon R. Dickson
18. John Brunner
19. Samuel R. Delany
20. Zenna Henderson
21. Theodore Sturgeon
22. Keith Laumer
23. Frank Herbert
24. Clifford D. Simak
25. James Blish
26. Barry N. Malzberg
27. Piers Anthony
28. David Gerrold.
29. Hal Clement
30. Edgar Rice Burroughs
31. Frederik Pohl
32. Stanley G. Weinbaum
33. E. E. Smith
34. J.R.R. Tolkien
35. Kurt Vonnegut
36. R.A. Lafferty
37. Philip K. Dick
38. Ben Bova
39. L. Sprague de Camp
40. John W. Campbell
41. Joanna Russ
42. Cordwainer Smith
43. Brian W. Aldiss
44. Michael Moorcock
45. Jules Verne
46. H.G. Wells

47. Gene Wolfe
48. Fredric Brown
49. H. Beam Piper
50. Lloyd Biggle

Maybe Ted can figure out something from that to make AMAZING a better magazine; perhaps he could swing an allstar issue with the top ten authors or something. But—

—Lester Boutillier and Thom Watson got the chance to shoot off their mouths about their personal opinions. After all that cataloging, I deserve *some* say, so I'll just say that I'd make the following changes:

People Who Don't Belong So Damned High On The List: Asimov (What are these people, masochists?); Vance (Big deal. So what's he written lately?); Blish (One really memorable book, and lately he's been writing tripe.); Edgar Burroughs (*blaah!*); Pohl; Vonnegut (Shouldn't be on the list at *all*—he doesn't write sf/fantasy. Ask him, he'll tell you so.); Bova; Verne (Cf Burroughs); and Piper.

People Who Belong Higher On The List: Heinlein (Well, if you remove Asimov, he's got to go up.); Bradbury (Not masochists. It appears that we have illiterati here.); Sheckley; Delany; Malzberg (Cf. Bradbury); Weinbaum (Trouble—not enough really to put him very high, but the quality of what he *did* write is unbelievable.); Dick (Cf Bradbury & Malzberg.); Russ; and Wells.

And, as long as we're throwing out Vonnegut, I'd put in Tom Disch. (Or maybe Bradbury twice.)

One last question: Does anyone there (*someone* must) know how I can get in touch with PENSFA? If so, please get in touch with me! Thank-alot!!!

Keep up the good work, Ted,

DANIEL J. OAKES
518 Outlook Drive

Los Altos, CA 94022

I shall refrain from comment except to note (in answer to your question) that Vance has had two novels published here in the last year and that is hardly the extent of his recent work. What I wonder is exactly how many people responded to your poll and what the extent of their reading experience is.—TW

Dear Mr. White:

I am surprised and a little disappointed to find in the May AMAZING your support of a return to the abbreviation "stf" for "Scientifiction". At the risk of sounding a bit opinionated, I would like to rebut with support for the more common "sf".

To begin with, "sf" is as neat a generic acronym as I recall seeing. It represents the field much more clearly and universally than most of the words used for the same purpose. You like "Scientifiction"? Fine. Abbreviation: "sf". "Science fiction"? Great. Abbreviation: "sf". "Speculative fantasy"? (That's my preference. I think it's somewhat more honest.) Abbreviation: "sf". "Stf" sorta locks you in, don't you think?

Also, I find it very difficult to disassociate "stf" in my mind from that lovable old invention of Andy Granitelli "STP oil treatment". Thanks, but no thanks.

Finally, let's discuss "ease of usage" versus verbal consonance. I am an sf consumer, not a fan. As a consequence, I see the term in print much more than I hear it. I have been sitting here practicing, however, for the past few minutes, and it is incomprehensible to me how you can advocate abandoning the soft, pleasant "esseff" in favor of the short, harsh "steff".

I feel strongly that it is long past

time that we as a society turned and examined with pride (and, more importantly, with honesty) our old and muddy and human roots. The field of sf literature deserves considerable praise for acknowledging its rather scruffy origins all the while it was building itself a perch of social acceptability.

Nevertheless, there is no reason that a proud awareness of your origins can't be achieved without exhuming a dusty scrap and waving it about, creating distraction and giving rise to letters such as this one!

Your magazines continue to be excellent. You pin-pointed the letter from Dan Barnett as accurately typical of the type of philosophy which needs to be exposed to the light of objective reality if humanity is ever going to stop the walls of this pit we have dug from collapsing on us.

JOHN W. KINNEY, JR.
3027 Omaha St.
Durham, N.C., 27705

Dear Ted,

I most emphatically disagree with your suggestion in the May AMAZING that "scientifiction" be reinstated as the preferred appellation for the genre. Everything about the word is retrograde. It is unpronounceable and cheaply coined, whose abbreviation "stf" has a constipated air. The *worst* feature of the word is something you cite as a virtue: its strong associations with the so-called "Golden Age" of science fiction. Nostalgia for bygone days should not blind us to the quality of the fiction generated in those times; true to Sturgeon's Law, it was 99% unadulterated crap, with even the best suffering from major flaws. Considering that the elegance and vision of Wells antedated the "Golden Age", we should consider ourselves

lucky that the genre is finally striving toward Wells' level once again. The SF of today is far superior to anything that came out of the early days and we would be dishonest to regard it otherwise—especially so if we chose to ennoble it with the gutter jargon of an immature phase of its development.

Rather than celebrate the anniversary of AMAZING by turning backwards, we should exert ourselves to anticipate future forms of expression within the genre. There are more worthy pursuits than the infantile preoccupation with technological power that has characterized so much of past SF (of which Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* is a recent stale example). We are not limited to the scientific romance; there are yet the worlds of heroic mythology, of psycholological transmutation, and alternate societies. The genre should encompass visions of destinies open to humanity, visions that suggest a vividness in life superior to anything found in conventional existence. Novels such as *The Dispossessed*, *The Book of Skulls*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Atlas Shrugged* should typify the SF of the future. To regress to "scientifiction" is absurd when the SF genre so strongly needs to be known as "superfiction".

MIKE DUNN
903 Bellevue Place East, #301
Seattle, WA., 98102

Dear Ted

I'm not only with you on the revival of "scientifiction"—but light years ahead! Since at least 1973 I've been plugging the revival of that venerable portmanteau word with quite a few more stf readers than are reached by AMAZING.

But! Don't you realize we have our work cut out for us? There are *plenty*
(cont. on page 128)

ozone molecules. Rowland—the “obscure scientist”—made the same discovery: Freon could conceivably destroy all or a significant portion of our ozone layer. The ozone layer is thin and has been painstakingly accrued over millions of years. It is our main shield against hard ultraviolet radiation. If destroyed or significantly weakened, the ozone layer would no longer protect us—or the rest of our planet’s life—from ultraviolet radiation in dosages far beyond our easy tolerance. Exposure to sunlight would cause skin cancers, and destroy or damage the DNA of many plants and animals, causing genetic mutations and retrogressions. Highly evolved food crops would probably disappear from the face of the earth.

This is a genuinely frightening threat. What is worse, we may already have released enough freon into our atmosphere over the last twenty-five years to do the damage.

Rowland’s findings have been verified by a panel of the National Academy of Sciences—the chairman of which, Donald Hunten of Kitt Peak National Observatory, urged an immediate ban on freon and urged an immediate full-scale study. And last November the Natural Resources Defense Council petitioned the government to outlaw spray cans.

But in Washington the buck is passed glibly from department to department. *New Times* author Michael Drosnin quotes an Environmental Protection Agency spokesman to the effect that “We take care of the *lower* atmosphere, and this is an *upper* atmosphere problem.” Over at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Lester Machta, a director, says “The freon/ozone predictions are still only a matter of speculation.” Lloyd Tepper of the FDA adds that

“Regulatory action will require information, firm information not yet available.”

Laugh? Thought I’d die.

WHAT CAN WE DO? The manufacturers of fluorocarbons are stepping up their production—if we’re going to die as a race in twenty-five years, they want to die rich—and DuPont, the world’s largest producer (they supply half the U.S. market) is building a huge new \$100 million (or more) factory in Corpus Christi, Texas, that will double DuPont’s Freon output by 1980.

I was impressed by the *New Times* article (from which I have quoted heavily here). I showed it to friends. One of them, author Linda Isaacs, wrote to the manufacturers of several aerosol products she possessed. One of them was a manufacturer of contraceptive foam, who wrote back to assure her that the aerosols which propelled the foam would not be injurious to her tissues and that there was no reason to fear damage to the ozone layer anyway.

It’s easy to bury our heads in the sand—as most commercial users of freon propellants appear to be doing—with the belief that, as Raymond L. McCarthy, of DuPont put it, “I have faith in the biosphere acting to preserve life.”

Well, yes, sure. Life will probably survive. But—*human* life? We’re talking about a basic atmospheric change, a basic change in the amount and kind of radiation which reaches the surface of our planet. We’re talking about something every bit as potentially destructive as radiation leakage from nuclear power plants—and then some. (The latter hazard is all the rage among counter-culturists these days; frankly, it doesn’t worry me half as much.) The kind of life best suited

to survive will be simple-celled life in the oceans. And, no doubt, cockroaches. Can we take much comfort in this knowledge, however?

What can we do?

It didn't take nearly as basic a threat to human or animal life to create a ban on DDT. But we waited until traces of the stuff showed up high in the animal food chains—and until alternatives were available.

Every year we wait to ban aerosols (which the human race did well without until roughly twenty-five years ago, and could survive without once again) we add tons more fluorocarbons to our atmosphere. Clearly we can't afford a long delay. It may be that we can afford *no* delay. We may already have delayed too long. We'll find out—by the end of this century. That's within the lifetimes of most of you. If you'd like to be able to take a walk in the sun in the year 2000, I suggest you write to your congressmen and senators *now*. Ask them to investigate the nature of this threat, and ask them to take positive action. Now.

There are over twenty thousand of you who buy this magazine each issue—and another five to ten thousand who buy it occasionally and may be reading this editorial. If each of you writes a letter to one representative, we'd get action. We'd get it *now*.

That's what we need.

As the newsweekly boys are in the habit of saying, "This isn't science fiction—this is *real*."

THIS ISSUE: Susan Wood's *The Clubhouse* is temporarily absent. Susan wrote to apologize for the delay, but she has just completed her PhD thesis and will soon be moving to Vancouver to teach there; her column

will return next issue. Although *The Clubhouse* has been absent from several previous issues, those absences were caused by overscheduling an issue and were not her fault. This is the first deadline Susan has had to miss, and the occasion is one she regrets.

Filling in for the absence of her column, however, is the return of *The Science in Science Fiction*. It's been nearly six years since the column made its debut here (in our November, 1969, issue), originally under the co-authorship of Greg Benford and David Book. After several years of regular appearance, the column began appearing less frequently, and occasionally under the by-line of either Benford or Book alone. When Book resigned from the column—under the pressure of other work—it went into dormancy, and has returned (under Benford's authorship) infrequently. This time we have two columns (two parts of one topic, actually) on hand and more promised from Benford. With luck, *The Science in Science Fiction* will once more be a regular feature of this magazine.

On the other hand, *The Future in Books* is presently being phased out. We have some, rather dated, reviews already set in type (some of which may appear here this issue if space permits) and when these are used up the feature will be allowed to die a final death. The column predates my editorship of this magazine by a few years, and was for a time capably handled by William (James Blish) Atheling, Jr. But in recent years it has been sorely squeezed by the presence of other material which I considered more important for the magazine—while at the same time the number of sf books being published has grown enormously, making it ever more difficult to deal with them com-

prehensively.

I am not ruling out a return of the column at a future date if more satisfactory arrangements for it can be made, but for now I feel that book reviews serve rather little purpose here—other magazines cover them adequately and new publications, like *Delap's F&SF Review*, devote them-

selves entirely to such reviews—and dated reviews are of even less purpose. So, thanks to Thomas F. Monteleone and Cy Chauvin, as well as all the others who have contributed to *The Future in Books* over the years, for their support for the column. It was appreciated.

—TED WHITE

Letters (cont. from page 125)
of people (and Ghod help you if Harlan is one of them—I can't recall that I've ever heard him express himself on the subject) who actively dislike the terms "scientifiction". "A clumsy mouthful". . . "certain to be misspelled 'scientification'". . . "let dead dinosaurs lie"—these are some of the reactions I suspect you can expect to your editorializing.

Fan Al Ashley (recently deceased)—he of the professed IQ of 194—once asked my subconscious, while he was demonstrating automatic writing to a group of sfans after an LASFS meeting, what I like best on Earth? Without a second's hesitation, in huge letters filling an entire sheet

of typing paper, my knowledgeable hand wrote: SCIENTIFCTION.

You should be pleased to hear that Kris Neville & Jean Cox are selecting stories for a sci-fi anthology (I said it and I'm glad, Harlan Ellison) to be known as . . . SCIENTIFCTION!

Sciencereally,
4e

FORREST J ACKERMAN
Hollywood, CA., 90027

You're pretty close to the mark on your expectations . . . as the foregoing letters indicate (although they don't represent the full response to my suggestion by any means). In any case, it's a pleasure to welcome AMAZING's First Letterhack back into the pages of our letters column.—TW

The Exploration of Venus (cont. from page 117)

but only four to five hundred meters deep.

The size and shallow nature of the craters suggests that they are impact craters, not volcanic, though by no means is the question closed. To survive the fall to the surface through the thick atmosphere would require a very large meteorite indeed. How these craters could persist despite the rapid erosion by super-heated, dense dust-laden winds, remains a mystery. Perhaps they are not craters formed by impact, but some breed of volcanic crater unknown on Earth.

V. Dreams and Realities

So THIS is what we've come to—a barren Venus. All along the way, there

was substantial resistance to the final truth about our sister world. Psychologically, the true picture was difficult to accept after so much hope.

But searching for a comfortable spot to live, or a near-Earth for life to begin, isn't the only point to extraterrestrial science. The popular press makes much of those ends, but what we're really after is knowledge. And that is why the exploration of Venus isn't a dead end, a wasted effort.

From this oven of a world we can learn much that is useful. In my column next issue I'll show how, and why it may be premature to close the door to speculation about life on Venus.

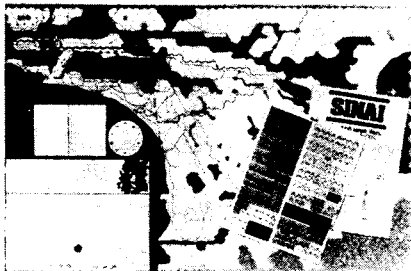
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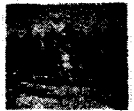
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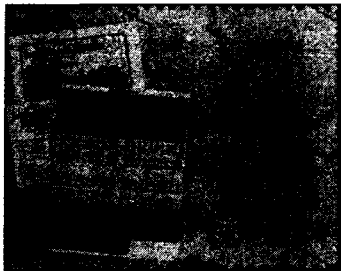


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